

The Countless Faces of Understanding:
On *Istinbāt*, Mystical Listening, and Sufi Exegesis

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a. *Istinbāt*

In his seminal work *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, Père Paul Nwyia states that the Sufis, in discussing their special Qur'anic exegetical method, refer to it as *istinbāt* rather than as *tafsīr* or *ta'wīl*.¹ On the face of it, this statement is corroborated by two classical Sufi compilations: The *Kitāb al-luma'* by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), which contains a section entitled *Kitāb al-mustanbaṭāt*,² and the *Tahdhīb al-asrār* by Abū Sa'd al-Khargūshī (d. 406/1012), which contains a chapter entitled *Bāb fī-dhikr mustanbaṭātihim min al-qur'ān wal-sunna*.³ Other Sufi compilations, however, such as *Kitāb al-ta'arruf* by al-Kalābādhī (d. ca. 380/990), *al-Risāla* by al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), or *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* by Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) – albeit incorporating copious exegetical material and discussions thereof – contain no similar chapter headings. Also lists of Sufi terms and definitions such as those we find in al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*, in *Kashf al-maḥjūb* by al-Hujwārī (d. ca. 456/1063-1064), in al-Suhrawardī's *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* and in al-Sarrāj's work itself,⁴ have no record of the term *istinbāt*. It appears that although the use of *istinbāt* and its derivatives is documented in Sufi literature, its usage

¹ "...quand les soufis eux-mêmes parlent de leur méthode, ils ne l'appellent ni *tafsīr* ni *ta'wīl* mais *istinbāt*: mot d'origine coranique, préféré par eux pour mieux se distinguer des autres" — Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, p. 34. See also idem, *Trois oeuvres*, pp. 25-26.

² See al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma'*, pp. 105-119.

³ See al-Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, pp. 198-212.

⁴ See *كتاب البيان عن المشكلات*, باب في شرح الألفاظ المشككة الجارية في كلام الصوفية, in al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma'*, pp. 333-374; *istinbāt* and its derivatives do not appear in the list. Cf., however, *باب في شرح استنباط القاء السمع*, *ibid*, pp. 80-81; also, *باب ذكر السابقين والمقربين والأبرار من طريق الفهم والاستنباط*, *ibid*, pp. 90-92, and esp. the section entitled *كتاب المستنبطات*, comprising five chapters, *ibid*, pp. 105-119.

is generally random and by no means dissimilar to its use in non-Sufi sources. In what follows I shall attempt to show that neither it, nor its derivatives, can be said to have the status of a technical term (*iṣṭilāḥ*, *lafẓ*) by which Sufi exegesis is named and distinguished from other exegetical methods.⁵ From the outset, it would seem that Nwyia's statement is far-fetched and calls for modification. At the same time, Sufi Qur'anic exegesis does have distinctive features, irrespective of whether these are qualified by a specific term or not. Beyond considering *istinbāṭ* and its derivatives, therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss and contextualize some distinctive exegetical features of the mystical tradition. As for *istinbāṭ*, while consulting the sources in order to clarify its appearance and usage, it became clear that the thematic study of *istinbāṭ* as a general exegetical Islamic method occupies a surprisingly marginal position both in the primary and in the secondary literatures. This unexpected find justifies a preliminary examination of the meaning and usage of the term *istinbāṭ* in Islamic literature in general, before embarking on the examination of Sufi exegesis in particular. What, then, is meant by *istinbāṭ*?

According to the classical dictionaries, the primary meaning of the root N-B-Ṭ is the gushing forth of water from a new well. In its fourth and tenth conjugations, the verb means to discover water hidden deep in the earth, to make it gush forth and to bring it to the surface.⁶ From this, it came to relate to anything that emerges or is brought out from the inside to the outside,⁷ including information, or assets.⁸ The inherent semantic nexus of *istinbāṭ* and water is reflected in an apparently ancient usage, documented in *Kitāb al-filāḥah al-nabaṭiyya* by ibn Waḥshiyya (d. 291/904). This work contains a detailed

⁵ On the special place of al-Sarrāj and *Kitāb al-luma* in modern research, see below, around notes 111-112.

⁶ See *Lisān al-ʿarab*, "Nabaṭ," vol. 7, pp. 410 ff.: وأنبطنا الماء... وأنبطنا الماء... أي استنبطناه وانتهينا إليه.

⁷ Ibid: نبط نبع، وكل ما اظهر فقد نبط.

⁸ Ibid: واستنبط منه علما وخبرا ومالا استخرجه، والاستنباط الاستخراج.

chapter entitled ‘*Bāb istinbāṭ al-miyā’ wa-handasatiḥā*’, where the discussion revolves around finding water, digging wells and drawing water from them.⁹ It should be borne in mind that finding water was considered one of the occult sciences, and therefore *istinbāṭ* can be associated with concepts such as *firāsa* (intuition, perceptiveness, physiognomy), a concept and term well-documented in the Sufi lexicon,¹⁰ and *riyāfa*, a supernatural ability to detect the presence of water or to find the right direction on a journey.¹¹ This, in itself, could have lent the word a special distinction in the mystical literary tradition, but ultimately this is not the case. The classical dictionaries also note the relationship between the root N-B-Ṭ and the ethnic group known as *al-nabaṭ* or *al-anbāṭ* (the Nabateans).¹² They further point out that in Islamic jurisprudence, *istinbāṭ* appears as a synonym of *istikhrāj*, both of which mean the extrapolation of an intrinsic law (*al-fiqh al-bāṭin*) from an extrinsic one (specified in canonical sources) or from the legal principles, through reasoning and understanding.¹³ According to the dictionaries, this usage is anchored in the Qur’an, where the root N-B-Ṭ appears only once, in sūrat *al-Nisā* (4):83: "When there comes to them a matter, be it of security or fear, they broadcast it; if they had referred it to the Messenger and to those in authority among them, those of them whose task it is to investigate (*alladhīna yastanbiṭūnahu minhum*) would have known the

⁹ See Fahd, Toufic, "Riyāfa," *EF*, vol. 8, p. 562; see also idem, "Un traité des eaux dans *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭiyya*: hydrogéologie, hydraulique agricole, hydrologie."

¹⁰ See, for example, al-Kalābādhi, *Kitāb al-ta’arruf*, chapter 68, p. 117; al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, p. 226; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, p. 105; al-‘Ajam, *Mawsū‘at muṣṭalaḥāt al-taṣawwuf*, pp. 707-709. Cf. a saying attributed to Abū Sa‘īd al-Kharrāz (d. 279/899) in discussing the term *firāsa*: "A *mustanbiṭ* is one who always observes the hidden; from such a one nothing is hidden nor concealed" - المستنبط من يلاحظ الغيب أبدا ولا - al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, *bāb al-firāsa*, p. 106.

¹¹ See T. Fahd, *La divination arabe*, pp. 403 ff.

¹² See *Lisān al-‘arab*, "Nabaṭ," vol. 7, p. 411.

¹³ واستنبط الفقيه إذا استخرج الفقه الباطن باجتهاده وفهمه - ibid, p. 410; see also al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, p. 159.

matter."¹⁴ The term *yastanbiṭūnahu*, which Arberry, cautiously, it seems, translates as 'investigate', is often explained by the exegetes as "they will extract it from its sources,"¹⁵ i.e., they will bring it out from its hiding-place and disclose it. Al-Ṭabarī, in his commentary, explains this idiom as follows: "A *mustanbiṭ* is anyone who brings to light something that was hidden from the eye's vision or from the heart's awareness".¹⁶ I shall come back to the exegetical literature in what follows, but first let us ponder the presence and use of *istinbāṭ* in legal literature. Here, more than in the exegetical sources, it seems to approach the status of a technical term, although it is conspicuously absent from the glosses of most works examined, as well as from studies on Muslim jurisprudence (for more on this see below, note 20). Al-Jurjānī's *Kitāb al-ta'rīfāt* is worth mentioning as he includes *istinbāṭ* (or, rather, the past participle *mustanbaṭ*) in his definition of the term *fiqh*. According to him, *fiqh* is an 'ilm *mustanbaṭ*, namely, a science whose methodology is based on hitting upon the correct, though inconspicuous, legal application by means of inference.¹⁷ Although not specifically defined in legal literature, the synonyms *istinbāṭ* and *istikhrāj* – especially *istikhrāj* – describe the technique of inferring

¹⁴ "وإذا جاءهم أمر من الأمن أو الخوف اذاعوا به ولو ردوه إلى الرسول وإلى أولى الأمر منهم لعلمهم الذين يستنبطونه منهم" (English quotations from the Qur'an are based on Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*).

¹⁵ – ومعنى يستنبطونه أي يستخرجونه من معادنه – see ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* on the verse; see also Abū 'Ubayda (d. 210/825), *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 134; see also the tradition concerning the circumstances in which the verse came down and 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's, who transmitted the tradition, declaration: "I interpreted this matter by means of *istinbāṭ* – فكنيت أنا استنبطت ذلك الأمر – Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 2, pp. 1105-1108 (*Kitāb al-ṭalāq*, 30).

¹⁶ وكل مستخرج شيء كان مستترا عن أبصار العيون وعن معارف القلوب فهو له مستنبط see al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 4, p. 181. Cf. the usage adopted by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī in concluding the chapters on the generations of the companions and successors: "Know that those mentioned above are among the companions and successors; among humans, they are similar to quarries and precious stones whose value and ranks are known only to the extractors [of treasures] (= *al mustanbiṭūn*), to (deep-sea) divers, and to the dignitaries among leaders and men of distinction, for they were the pillars and foundation of the religion"

واعلموا أن الذين تقدم ذكرهم من الصحابة التابعين فإن مثلهم من الناس كمثل المعادن والجواهر الذين لا يعرف مقامهم ومراتبهم إلا المستنبطون والغواص والأكابر من السادة الخواص لأنهم كانوا أعمدة الدين والاساس –

Hilyat al-awliyā', vol. 6, p. 160. For a comprehensive discussion of the Qur'anic expression *alladhīna yastanbiṭūnahu minhum* and its exegetical and legalistic implications, see al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, pp. 158-161.

¹⁷ See al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-ta'rīfāt*, vol. 1, p. 216, No. 1098: وقيل: <الفقه> هو الاصابة والوقوف على المعنى الخفي الذي يتعلق به الحكم وهو علم مستنبط بالرأي والاجتهاد

positivistic laws (*aḥkām far‘iyya*) from the basic principles of Islamic jurisprudence. This technique relies, as is generally accepted, on four canonical means that are always at the forefront of the Sunni jurist: the Qur’an, the Sunna, the general consensus (*ijmā‘*) and analogy (*qiyās*). For example, in *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, Ḥājjī Khalīfa, under the entry *‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, gives the following explanation:

The science of Islamic jurisprudence (*‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*) is knowledge based on the extrapolation (*istinbāṭ*) of canonical laws from their general prooftexts [...]. Its aim is to develop the skill (*malaka*) of deriving positivistic laws (*istinbāṭ al-aḥkām al-shar‘iyya al-far‘iyya*) from the four authoritative sources: The Book, the Sunna, general consensus (*ijmā‘*) and analogy (*qiyās*); its benefit is that [through it one learns] to derive these laws correctly.¹⁸

Interestingly, even where *qiyās*, the fourth mean, is contested and rejected, the interpretative act of *istinbāṭ* is accepted, as is evident from Ibn Khaldūn who, in the *Muqaddima* – at least according to some manuscripts – describes the Ḥanbali method as follows: "As for Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, those who follow him blindly (*muqallidūhu*) are few, because his method rebuffs *ijtihād* and is firmly rooted in the verification of Ḥadīth transmission through aligning one tradition with another... Those who adhere to his *madhhab* are the firmest upholders of the Sunna and the Ḥadīth; as they shun *qiyās*, they address these traditions, whenever possible, by means of *istinbāṭ*."¹⁹

¹⁸ See Ḥājjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, vol. 1, p. 110; cf. ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, vol. 3, p. 1046 (on the science of *fiqh*): "When laws are extrapolated from these proofs, this [act] is called *fiqh*" - فاذا استخرجت الأحكام - من تلك الأدلة قيل لها فقه; and later: "afterwards, the cities of Islam grew [...] [and the method] of extrapolation (*istinbāṭ*) was consolidated, and [the knowledge] of jurisprudence matured into a profession and science" - ثم عظمت أمصار الاسلام... وتمكن الاستنباط وكمل الفقه وأصبح صناعة وعلمًا; see also J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, pp. 1, 134, et passim; idem, *Introduction*, ca. p. 60. On questions relating to legalistic terminology, see the comprehensive monograph by Bernard Weiss on al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233): Weiss, *The search*, Introduction, ca. p. 24. On *istinbāṭ* as a deductive method adopted by *mutakallimūn* of the Ḥanafī legal school, see al-Samarkandī, Abū Layth, *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-absaṭ li-abī Ḥanīfa*, p. 69, line 195 - I am grateful to Professor E. Kohlberg for calling my attention to this reference.

¹⁹ See Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, vol. 3, p. 1051:

فأما أحمد بن حنبل، فمقلدوه قليل لبعد مذهبه عن الاجتهاد وأصالته في معاضدة الرواية والاختبار بعضها ببعض... وهم أكثر الناس حفظاً للسنة ورواية الحديث وميلاً بالاستنباط إليه عن القياس ما أمكن.

It follows, therefore, that *istinbāṭ*, used with no derogative nuances, designates the *faqīh*'s ability to elaborate positivistic laws through the judicious application of the legal principles. This is noteworthy as, although in meaning and usage *istinbāṭ* seems to belong to a similar semantic category as *ijtihād* (independent judgment) and *qiyās* (analogy) - terms which, notoriously, draw passionate critique and rejection, *istinbāṭ* has maintained a fluid and neutral position, perhaps because it never developed into a full-blown technical term in its own right, as is evidenced, for example, by the fact that in the secondary literature on Islamic jurisprudence – the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* included – *istinbāṭ* is barely referred to.²⁰

A similar non-critical use of *istinbāṭ* can be found in appraisals of the science of exegesis at large (*ʿilm al-tafsīr*). Unlike the controversial terms *raʿy*, *qiyās* and *taʿwīl*,²¹ *istinbāṭ* is generally free of polemical overtones. The act of *istinbāṭ* is approved of even by strict Sunnis who dismiss interpretations based on deductive and allegorical methods. The following passage by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), the most distinguished disciple of the Ḥanbali *Sheikh al-islām* Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), illustrates this point. In his book *al-Wābil al-ṣayyib min al-kalim al-ṭayyib* (The Torrential Rain of the Goodly Word), ibn Qayyim describes Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 58/687), the epitome of Qurʾanic exegetes, as follows:

²⁰ As far as I could ascertain, this term does not appear in the indices of the following textbooks: J. Schacht, *Introduction*, B. Weiss (ed.), *Studies in Islamic Legal Theory*, nor is there any mention of it in the table of contents of Weiss, *The Search*. It is noteworthy that al-Āmidī himself, the subject of Weiss' monograph (see note 18), when discussing *qiyās*, does use the term *istinbāṭ* and its derivatives - see, for example, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, vol. 3, p. 87 et passim. The term is also missing from the index of J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* and from the index of Christopher Melchert, *The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law*. This absence is noteworthy, especially vis-à-vis the extensive and systematic discussion of *istinbāṭ* in al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, pp. 139-161.

²¹ On the complexity of the term *taʿwīl* and its evolution from a synonym of *tafsīr* to a term denoting an exegesis inclined towards allegorization, see I. Poonawala, " *Taʿwīl*," *EF*, vol. 10, p. 390; see also below, notes 28, 101. On the development and complexities of the term *qiyās*, see M. Bernand, " *Qiyās*," *EF*, vol. 5, p. 238.

Ibn ‘Abbās’ knowledge is like the sea. His discernment (*fiqhuhu*),²² his extrapolation of meaning (*istinbāṭuhu*) and his understanding (*fahmuhu*) of the Qur’an place him above all others [from among the prophet's companions]. For behold, he heard just as they heard, and consigned the Qur’an to memory just as they did – but his soil was one of the choicest and most fertile. He prepared it for sowing and scattered on it the seeds of the scriptural texts ‘and it brought forth many good crops’ [*al-Shu‘arā* (26):7; *Luqmān* (31):10].²³

According to Ibn Qayyim, then, the extent of Ibn ‘Abbās’ powers to extrapolate one thing from another and to expose the hidden from the overt single him out from other Qur’anic exegetes, so much so that they bow to his rulings. In this respect, adds Ibn Qayyim, Ibn ‘Abbās surpasses even Abū Hurayra, although none of the Prophet’s companions could compete with the latter's remarkable memory, or with the sheer number of traditions which he had memorized and transmitted to subsequent generations:

How can we compare Ibn ‘Abbās’ legal rulings (*fatāwā*), exegesis (*tafsīruhu*) and powers of extrapolation (*istinbāṭuhu*) with the rulings and understanding of Abū Hurayra, [regardless of] the latter being a greater transmitter than the former - in fact, the greatest tradition transmitter of this nation?! Abū Hurayra transmitted the traditions just as he had heard them. He studied them by night and was wholly dedicated to their preservation and transmission. Ibn ‘Abbās, on the other hand, dedicated himself to understanding (*tafaqquh*) the laws and

²² On *fiqh* in the sense of knowledge and understanding, see *Lisān al-‘Arab*, vol. 13, p. 522; for an etymological discussion of *fiqh* that implies an understanding by which what is hidden becomes exposed, see al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, vol. 1, pp. 135-137; on the original teaching of *fiqh* and its derivatives, before it developed into a term denoting ‘jurisprudence,’ see Goldziher-Schacht, "*Fiqh*," *EF*, vol. 2, p. 889.

²³ فعلم ابن عباس كالبهر وفقهه واستنباطه وفهمه في القرآن بالموضع الذي فاق به الناس وقد سمع كما سمعوا وحفظ القرآن كما حفظوا, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Wābil al-ṣayyib*, pp. 58-59. Note that the expression "he prepared it for sowing," whether knowingly or not, echoes the New Testament "parable of the sower"; for a comparative discussion of this parable in the context of mystical exegetical practices, see below, around notes 74-76.

to drawing them out (*istinbāt*), causing the water of the scriptural rivers to gush forth and reveal their hidden treasures (*istikhrāj kunūziha*).²⁴ It is difficult to miss the impassioned and rhetorical use of the word *istinbāt* in the above passage, penned by a foremost devotee and spokesman of Orthodox Islam. Positive *istinbāt*, sustained, no doubt, by its Qur'anic antecedent in sūrat *al-Nisā*, is thus perceived as the ability, divinely bestowed upon men of authority – *'ulī al-amr*²⁵ - to engage in a profound interpretative study of scripture and tradition by resorting to a somewhat inferential and intuitive method. It reflects, perhaps surprisingly, an acceptance and approval of the ability of such men to draw implicit interpretations by correct reasoning, so as to extend the scope of the Sunna without overstepping it or shaking its foundations.²⁶ Abū 'Abbās possessed this skill; Ibn Qayyim, like his master Ibn Taymiyya, portrayed him, therefore, as the paragon of correct Qur'anic exegesis and

²⁴ وأين تقع فتاوى ابن عباس وتفسيره واستنباطه من فتاوى أبي هريرة وتفسيره وأبو هريرة أحفظ منه، بل هو حافظ الأمة على الإطلاق، يؤدي الحديث كما سمعه ويدرسه بالليل درسا، فكانت همته مصروفة إلى الحفظ وتبليغ ما حفظه كما سمعه، وهمة ابن عباس مصروفة إلى التلقين والاستنباط وتفجير النصوص وشق الأنهار منها واستخراج كنوزها *ibid.* To Ibn Qayyim's partiality to Ibn 'Abbās vis-à-vis Abū Hurayra, cf. the distinction that Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) makes between the sagacity of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and the lack of intelligence of one of the companions who, in Baṣra, transmitted traditions he had heard from the Prophet himself with no understanding of their meaning – see al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, pp. 147-148 (ذكر وصف العلم وطريقة السلف...); cf. also the distinction that Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168) makes between Ḥadīth transmitters and those who use Ḥadīth for drawing laws out of them: "The predominance of jurists over men of Ḥadīth, from whom the former had received their knowledge, is their being endowed with understanding, with ability to extrapolate laws from the Ḥadīth and with profound and meticulous study of the religious laws and ordinances... The latter are, therefore, the most distinguished religious judges" – أما الفقهاء فضلوا على أصحاب الحديث بعد قبول علمهم بما خصوا به من الفهم - *Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī, Ādāb al-murīdīn*, p. 14, section 35 (Abū al-Najīb was the uncle of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, on whose *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* see the lengthy discussion in what follows.).

²⁵ According to the verse under discussion; for the issue of the identity of these "men of authority", see al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, pp. 159 ff.

²⁶ Note that Ibn Ḥazm, a Zahirite scholar, seems to deny any positive implication of *istinbāt* in interpreting verse 83 of sūra 4. He writes: "If they were sincere, [they would have realized that] this verse contains the strongest proof for rejecting *istinbāt*" – *ولا حجة أعظم في إبطال الاستنباط من هذه الآية لو أنصفوا أنفسهم* - *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, vol. 6, p. 21; on Ibn Ḥazm's strict position, see Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, vol. 3, p. 1048; cf. also al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ*, al-Mas'ala al-thālitha, vol. 10, p. 159: among other exegetical options, al-Rāzī mentions that *yastanbiṭūnahu* in 4:83 possibly refers to the *mūnāfiqūn* (hypocrites), thus implying a negative connotation of *istinbāt*.

judicious derivation of laws.²⁷ Not for nothing was he called *turjumān al-Qur'ān*, the interpreter of the Qur'an. He deserved that the Prophet's prayer on his behalf be fulfilled: "O God, grant him the understanding of religion and teach him the interpretation of Scripture."²⁸ The principles that govern the application of orthodox exegesis are clearly laid out in a descending order: Firstly, to explain the Qur'an by the Qur'an: what is generalized in one verse may be specified in another; what is cursorily mentioned in one passage may be elaborated upon in another. Secondly, to resort to the Prophet's Sunna, which, like the Qur'an, was divinely inspired. Thirdly, to resort to the sayings of the companions, primarily to such authorities as the four righteous caliphs, 'Abdallāh ibn Mas'ūd and 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abbās. Only as a last resort may one seek guidance with one of the successors (*al-tābi'ūn*). Exegesis based on this kind of *istinbāṭ* is correct and constructive, unlike exegesis that is based on independent reasoning (*ra'y*) alone.²⁹ We may conclude this part by suggesting that the exegetical methodology, evolved and preserved in Orthodox circles for juridical or other purposes, makes room for understanding Qur'anic passages that cannot be interpreted literally by applying *istinbāṭ* – understanding by means of wise extrapolation and intuitive discernment. Alongside the loyalty to the model of eminent scholars such as 'Abdallāh ibn Mas'ūd and 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abbās, who laid down the foundation for exegetes and jurists,³⁰ even staunch followers

²⁷ See the appraisal of the seventh/thirteenth-century Ibn Taymiyya, *Uṣūl al-tafsīr*, p. 42: "As to *tafsīr*, the people of Mecca are the most proficient in it, because they are the companions of Ibn 'Abbās" وأما التفسير فإن أعلم الناس به أهل مكة لأنهم أصحاب ابن عباس.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 63; on *fiqh* in the sense of knowledge, see above, note 22; on the free use of *ta'wīl* in connection with Ibn 'Abbās, see the comments of Abū Zayd, Naṣr Ḥāmid, *Falsafāt al-ta'wīl*, pp. 12 ff.

²⁹ See Ibn Taymiyya, *Uṣūl al-tafsīr*, pp. 60-69.

³⁰ Cf. *Uṣūl al-tafsīr*, p. 69 with Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, a 'conservative' Sufi, in *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, chapter 31 (= the section on "Concerning the division of disciplines: the best and most ancient, the newest and reviled" (ذكر تفصيل العلوم معروفها وقديمها ومحدثها ومنكرها), p. 340: "Exegesis by means of *ta'wīl*, if it does not deviate from the general consensus (*ijmā'*), can be considered [valid] knowledge; exegesis by means of *istinbāṭ*, if it is deposited in the Qur'an, [namely], testified by the totality of the Qur'an and uncontradicted by the

of orthodox and normative practices do not shy away from lauding the use of a skill to which they refer, though not systematically, as *istinbāṭ*: a correct and constructive application of wise interpretative skills.³¹ And yet, it is also worth noting that notwithstanding the common approval of *istinbāṭ*, in fact, only a marginal space is allowed for an individual enterprise of understanding Scripture and its practical and legal implications. Admittedly, even surprisingly, a sort of personal attempt at understanding the Qur'an and the Ḥadīth seems to be accepted. In practice, however, within the limits of the canonical sources of knowledge, personal enterprise is barely accounted for or

sacred text, [such an exegesis] is [valid] knowledge" كان العلم والاستنباط اذا كان *istinbāṭ*: "Whatever they report to you which is based on [prophetic] traditions and accounts, accept; but whatever they report to you which is based on their own opinion, spit on it - and once he even said, piss on it" ما حدثوك عن السنن والآثار فخذ به وما حدثوك عما أخذوا من رأيهم فامحط عليه وقد قال مرة قبل عليه. On the assertion that all branches of knowledge are (potentially) deposited in the Qur'an and can be drawn out from it by *istinbāṭ*, see al-Suyūṭī, *al-Iklīl*, pp. 7-8.

³¹ Cf. ibn Taymiyya, *op. cit.*, with the concise exegetical-legalistic methodology described by the third/ninth century Muḥammad ibn Naṣr al-Marwazī, *Kitāb al-sunna*, p. 107: "it is said: the Prophet, peace be upon him, did not permit nor forbid anything other than what God [permitted and] forbade in his Book, whether in an explicit text or by the obligation to obey Him. The companions of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and their successors unanimously agreed that the foundations of knowledge and law are [included] in the Book of God; it contains clear [verses] that can be easily understood when recited, and other that are drawn out (*mustanbaṭ*) by the investigation of men of knowledge and understanding" قالوا فما أحل النبي صلعم بسنته ولا حرم ما حرم الله في كتابه اما نصا واما بما أوجبه من طاعته، وكان اجماع أصحاب النبي صلعم والتابعين على أن اصول العلم والاحكام في كتاب الله فمنه بين مفهوم في تلاوته ومنه مستنبط بالبحث من أهل العلم والفهم عن الله. On Abū 'Abdālla Muḥammad ibn Naṣr al-Marwazī, a Ḥadīth transmitter and a Shāfi'ī *faqīh* from Samarkand (d. 294/906), see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdād*, vol. 4, pp. 85-88, No. 1732; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 14, pp. 33-40, No. 13. To these statements cf. al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma'*, باب البيان عن علم التصوف، p. 6, lines 1-4: "All the religious sciences do not surpass the following three: Verses from the Book of God most High, tradition on (or by) God's Messenger, peace be upon him, and drawn out wisdom (*ḥikma mustanbaṭa*) which occurred to the heart of one of God's friends" وجملة علوم الدين لا تخرج عن ثلاث: آيات من كتاب الله عز وجل أو خبر عن رسول الله صلعم أو حكمة مستنبطة خطرت على قلب ولي من أولياء الله. Later (lines 14-17) al-Sarrāj writes: "Anyone who is baffled regarding one of the religious principle or its branches, laws, truths, preventive measures, and ordinances, whether in their outer or inner sense, must turn to these three classes [of men of knowledge]: the men of Ḥadīth, the jurists and the Sufis" فكل من أشكل عليه أصل من أصول الدين وفروعه "الرجال الثلاثة: أصحاب الحديث والفقهاء والصوفية وحقوقه وحقائفه وحدوده وأحكامه ظاهرا وباطنا فلا بد له من الرجوع إلى هؤلاء الأصناف الثلاثة: أصحاب الحديث والفقهاء والصوفية". Note the difference between Ibn Naṣr's formulation: "that are drawn out (*msutanbaṭ*) by the investigation of men of knowledge and understanding" and al-Sarrāj's "drawn out wisdom (*ḥikma mustanbaṭa*) which occurred to the heart of one of God's friends." This difference indicates that the Sufis saw themselves as the true 'authorities of knowledge' (أولي العلم) endowed with *istinbāṭ* which they achieve not by means of investigation and speculation, but by means of inspiration and revelation (and see more below).

allowed.³² This, as will be shown in what follows, is in clear distinction to the Sufi vision of what al-Suhrawardī describes as the "countless faces of understanding" – the phrase borrowed from him for this paper's title.

b. *Mustanbaṭāt*: Sufi exegetical insights according to al-Sarrāj

The most comprehensive discussion of *istinbāṭ* in Sufi literature can be found in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma*.³³ Al-Khargūshī's compilation, too, contains a chapter on Sufi insightful interpretations of verses and traditions, which he names *mustanbaṭāt*, but whereas al-Khargūshī merely compiles Sufi dicta on *istinbāṭ*, al-Sarrāj goes further, seeking to clarify the nature and characteristics of this exegetical technique in its Sufi context. In the chapter entitled *Kitāb al-mustanbaṭāt*, al-Sarrāj offers the following definition:

Mustanbaṭāt are what is extracted by those among men of understanding who have attained truth (*al-mutaḥaqqiqūn*). [It is gained] by being in accord with God's Book concerning what is explicit and what is implicit in it; by following in the footsteps of God's Messenger, peace be upon him, inwardly and outwardly; and by acts of worship [inspired] by it which they carry out in their exteriors and their interiors.³³

In al-Sarrāj's definition we encounter a different epistemology from the one we have seen above: the knowledge which he promulgates is derived neither by means of speculation nor through outwardly following the religious authorities; rather, it is inspirational knowledge, the product, or the bequest, of a devotional way of life in both its outward and inward dimensions. His is a call to an all-encompassing inner-outer harmonization at

³² On this issue, see al-Rāzī's explanation of the term *ʿulī al-amr* (4:83) in *Mafātīḥ*, vol. 10, p. 159; cf. al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, p. 106, line 8, and see also end of previous note.

³³ المستنبطات ما استنبط أهل الفهم من المتحققين بالموافقة لكتاب الله عز وجل ظاهرا وباطنا والمتابعة لرسول الله صلعم ظاهرا وباطنا - al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, p. 105, line 5-7.

all levels of worship. True understanding, to al-Sarrāj, is neither the product of deductive-analogical reasoning (*ra'y, naẓar, qiyās*), nor of an unconditional acceptance (*taqlīd*) of authoritative pronouncements, nor of consensus (*ijmā'*), but of a devotional adherence to scripture and tradition to which inner work is added. Complete devotional adherence is the prerequisite to attaining a higher kind of knowledge – mystical knowledge, the knowledge of the hearts, which, in its turn, amplifies the practical aspects of devotion. We are entering here the arena of exclusive mystical epistemology, in which meaningful insights (*mustanbatāt*) into Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions cannot be achieved by ordinary, cognitive means but are divinely inspired. They are given by hints and allusions whose deciphering is the domain of a select few only. Even the *'ulamā'*, the religious scholars, who are revered by the entire nation, are excluded, unless it is granted to them by God's grace. In al-Sarrāj's words:

When they worship [God] according to what they *know*, God bequeaths to them (*warathahum*) the knowledge of what they *do not know*, that is, the knowledge of allusion, the knowledge of the bequeathed acts of worship (*'ilm mawārīth al-a'māl*); God reveals it to the hearts of his pure and chosen ones. It contains hidden meanings, concealed subtleties and secrets, wondrous sciences and rare portions of wisdom [concerning the] meanings of the Qur'an and the reports concerning God's Messenger; [and all these] according to their [mystical] states, their moments [of mystical experiences] and the purity of their remembrances [of God].³⁴

³⁴ فلما عملوا بما علموا من ذلك ورثهم الله علم ما لم يعلموه وهو علم الإشارة وعلم مواريث الأعمال التي يكشف الله لقلوب أصفياؤه من المعاني المخزونة واللطائف والأسرار المخزونة وغرائب العلوم وطرائف الحكم من معاني القرآن ومعاني أخبار رسول الله صلعم من حيث أحوالهم وأوقاتهم وصفاء أنكارهم - ibid, lines 7-11; note the repeated use of the root W-R-TH denoting endowing, bequeathing - it alludes, no doubt, to the Sufis' self-perception as the true successors of the prophets as predicted in the well-known *ḥadīth*: "The sages are the successors of the prophets" - ان العلماء ورثة الأنبياء -

On the face of it, al-Sarrāj may be understood to have given *istinbāṭ* a new meaning, in a way that may justify Nwyia's understanding of the Sufi appropriation of *istinbāṭ* as a term designating their special mystical exegesis (see above, p. 1). But, effectively, in all contexts, *istinbāṭ* remains a kind of drawing out, reading into, explicating, extrapolating – whether by means of speculation, canonization of meanings, insight, or by way of divine inspiration. Typologically, there cannot be said to be an *istinbāṭ* which is specifically Sufi. Mystical knowledge as such is not synonymous with *istinbāṭ*, and the term *mustanbaṭāt*, even according to al-Sarrāj himself, applies to a variety of categories of commentary-making. The difference between general *istinbāṭ* and Sufi *istinbāṭ* is that behind the latter lies a programme of arduous practices designed for cultivating the inner, psychological senses, making them ready to receive and internalize hidden truths. This clearly transpires from the following citation:

The jurists and scholars in the cities of Islam have a ready stock of famous insights (*mustanbaṭāt mashhūra*) on Qur'anic verses and on explicit reports [concerning the Prophet], upon which they draw in polemical exchanges with one another over controversial issues [...]. So it is also with the people of *kalām* and rational speculation. Their rational arguments, which are also insights (*mustanbaṭāt*), are approved and accepted by their associates... However, far better than these are the insights (*mustanbaṭāt*) of the men of [mystical] knowledge³⁵ and those who draw close to God through supererogatory acts of worship, the people of ultimate truths. [For them, insights] are the result of knowledge, verification, sincerity in their acts of self exertion, self disciplining and [voluntary] worship.³⁶

³⁵ The term *ahl al-‘ilm* is used by al-Sarrāj to explain the idiom *‘ulī al-amr* of 4:83 as referring to those who possess mystical knowledge.

³⁶ ولفقهاء الأمصار و علمائها في كل وقت مستنبطات مشهورة في آيات القرآن والأخبار الظاهرة مستعدة للاحتجاج بها بعضهم على بعض في المسائل الخلافية بينهم... وكذلك أهل الكلام والنظر احتجاجهم العقلية كلها مستنبطات وكل ذلك حسن عند أهلها ومقبول... وأحسن من ذلك مستنبطات أهل العلم بالعلم والتحقيق والإخلاص في العمل من المجاهدات والرياضات والمعاملات والمتقربين إلى الله بأنواع الطاعات وأهل الحقائق - al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, p. 106, lines 12-22; cf. al-Ḥusayn [al-Ḥallāj ?]'s explanation:

"Understanding the Qur'an through *istinbāṭ* is comensurate with the external and internal piety of God's servant and with the completeness of his [mystical] knowledge – this is the most elevated among the

So what *is* specific to Sufi understanding? What al-Sarrāj terms *mustanbaṭāt* in the Sufi context is clearly not the product of human mental activity but rather the product of the mystical experiences, in which God's hidden realm is disclosed to the internal organs known as 'the eyes and the ears of the heart'. An understanding of this kind is contingent on the mystical state of the Sufi to whom God's disclosure is bestowed and on his/her spiritual preparedness: "according to their [mystical] states, their moments [of mystical experiences] and the purity of their remembrances [of God]." In other words, inasmuch as the levels of the individual experiences differ from one another, so also the levels, or depths, of understanding, whence the notion of the countless faces of possible understandings. In this semantic perspective there is hardly any room left for collective consensus or normative authority. Each and every aspirant (*murīd*), who truly seeks to attain knowledge of God according to the Sufi perspective, must strive to develop the inner qualities which will enable him/her to understand the sacred words, in a way compatible with their individual state at any given moment. These are the 'mystical moments,' the *aḥwāl* and *awqāt*, the changing experiences that transcend time and that confer different aspects of understanding. From this perspective, the *murīd* is called upon to commit himself to a way of life that includes practices which go beyond the prescribed religious duties, the *farā'id*. Part of the devotional curriculum is to develop an ability to listen attentively when exposed to verses and traditions orally recited.³⁷ In the Sufi

al- (قال الحسين: استنباط القرآن على مقدار تقوى العبد في ظاهره وباطنه وتمام معرفته وهذا أجل مقامات الايمان) - al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*; vol. 1, p. 157.

³⁷ On this issue, see al-Sarrāj's formulation in the next chapter of *Kitāb al-luma'*, "On the variability of the insights of men of truth" (باب كيفية الاختلاف في مستنبطات أهل الحقيقة): "Like men of external [knowledge], they, too, have different insights; however, differences in the knowledge of the former lead to erroneous judgment, while differences in internal knowledge does not do so, since [it is based on] graces, good and noble qualities, [mystical] states, character traits, stations and ranks" - وهم أيضا في مستنبطاتهم مختلفون كاختلاف أهل -

programme that leads to understanding, attentive listening, therefore, is one of the first steps to be taken. It is one of the first practices that the aspirant should adopt and accomplish in exerting himself to the gaining of a profound and all-inclusive understanding of scripture and tradition. A discussion of mystical understanding and exegesis should start, therefore, in elaborating the practice of listening, *istimāʿ*. No wonder that al-Sarrāj devotes several sections of the *Kitāb al-lumaʿ* to discussing this practice.³⁸ We shall review al-Sarrāj's material below as part of a broader discussion of the practice of listening.

c. The practice of listening (*istimāʿ*) leading to mystical understanding

The nature and method of correct listening occupies a central place in Sufi literature, especially in the context of discussing and interpreting Qur'anic verses. As we shall see, listening in the Sufi context is not merely a sensory or mental act, but rather a contemplative practice. This practice, if correctly performed, may lead to a mystical experience; the mystical experience, in turn, may lead to a direct understanding of God's words, an immediate understanding that bypasses and transcends external exegetical mediation. This is borne out by Qur'anic verses. The main axis around which the passages presented below revolve is the verse "Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart, or will give ear with a present mind" [*Q*(50):37].³⁹ The choice of this verse by many Sufi authors is not fortuitous. Even a cursory scrutiny of the key words in

الظاهر غير أن اختلاف أهل الظاهر يؤدي إلى الحكم الغلط والخطأ والاختلاف في علم الباطن لا يؤدي إلى ذلك لأنها فضائل ومحاسن
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³⁸ See al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-lumaʿ*, pp. 72-92.

³⁹ "ان في ذلك لذكرى لمن كان له قلب أو ألقى السمع وهو شهيد"

it – 'reminder' (*dhikrā*), 'heart' (*qalb*), 'giving ear' (*ilqā' al-sam'*) and 'witness' (*shahīd*) – establishes why Sufi authors and compilers chose it as their starting point in discussing the ethical, didactic and mystical components of Sufi exegesis. Remembrance, the heart, attentiveness and witnessing – all of which allude to contemplative practices – form the bedrock of the Sufi tradition.

As is chronologically fit, we shall begin our discussion of this verse with *Kitāb al-ri'āya li-ḥuqūq allāh* (Watchfulness in Observing God's Duties) by al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857).⁴⁰ Al-Muḥāsibī, an early author from Baghdad, developed a psychological-ethical doctrine which emphasizes the need for a systematic programme of inner self-scrutiny and self-improvement as a prerequisite for attaining the most accomplished type of worship. Sufis throughout the Muslim world have studied the theory and practice laid down in his teachings. They have adopted his ethical-psychological precepts and terminology (we shall briefly discuss its possible Christian antecedents below, around notes 72-76) and have developed it in many subsequent treatises and compilations. His fundamental distinction between 'the worship of the limbs' (*a'māl al-jawāriḥ*) and 'the worship of the hearts' (*a'māl al-qulūb*) had far-reaching repercussions also for Jewish seekers in the Middle Ages.⁴¹ The introduction to his book is in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and his disciple. Before taking up his teaching, the author demands of his real or fictitious disciple complete attentiveness.

In al-Muḥāsibī own words: "Before I answer your questions, I would urge you to pay

⁴⁰ On al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī, see al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, pp. 49-53; M. Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*; R. Arnaldez, "al-Muḥāsibī" *EF*, vol. 7, p. 446 ff; van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, pp. 466 ff.

⁴¹ On al-Muḥāsibī's influence on Baḥyā ibn Paqūda (Spain, 11th century), see Amos Goldreich, "On the Possible Arabic Source for the distinction between 'the Duties of the Limbs' and 'the Duties of the Hearts'," *Te'uda* 61988, pp. 179-208 (in Hebrew); on the continuing influence of the doctrine of the internalization of the service of God in medieval Jewish mysticism, see S. Sviri, "The emergence of pre-Kabbalistic spirituality in Spain: The case of Baḥyā ibn Paqūda and Judah Halevi," *Donaire* 1996, pp. 78-84.

proper attention in order that by it you may gain understanding of all that God asks of you".⁴² True attentiveness implies not only listening with one's ears, but also with one's heart and mind and corresponds to the disciple's earnest willingness to internalize the explanations to his questions offered by the master. This demand al-Muḥāsibī bases on the aforementioned verse (50:37). The exegetes, says al-Muḥāsibī, equate heart with intellect (‘*‘aql*’).⁴³ As for the rest of the verse, al-Muḥāsibī invokes Mujāhid, an early exegete,⁴⁴ who interprets ‘witness’ (*shahīd*) as "one whose heart is present" (*shāhid al-qalb*),⁴⁵ who "does not converse with his self at all" (*lā yuḥaddithu nafsahu bi-shay’*), and "whose heart is not absent [due to inattentiveness]" (*wa-laysa bi-ghā’ib al-qalb*).⁴⁶ Al-Muḥāsibī adds:

He who, out of yearning for God, listens to God's Book, or to a word of wisdom, or to a portion of knowledge, or to a piece of counsel while not conversing with his self at all but [concentrating] his attention and allowing his heart to *see* what he hears, such a one will derive counsel and remembrances [from the words he hears], for they are God's words.⁴⁷ God described the believers [as listeners] and commanded them [to listen] saying: "My servants who give ear to the Word and follow the fairest of it. Those are they whom God has guided; those – they are men possessed of minds"⁴⁸ [*al-Zumar*(39):18].

al- – وقد أحببت قبل جوابي إياك عما سألت عنه أن أحضك على حسن الاستماع لتدرك به الفهم عن الله عز وجل في كل ما دعاك إليه
Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-ri’āya*, p. 1, lines 10-12.

⁴³ Cf. al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, p. 92: "To he who has intellect with which he acquires knowledge of religious law" (لمن كان له عقل يكسب به علم الشرع).

⁴⁴ Mujāhid ibn Jābir al-Makkī (d. ca. 100/722), one of the Prophet's companions, an early exegete of the ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abbās school, and see on him A. Rippin, "Mudjāhid b. Djabr al-Makkī", *EP*, vol. 7, p. 293.

⁴⁵ On ‘Shahīd as ‘Shāhid,’ see also al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Taḥṣīl naẓā’ir al-Qur’ān*, pp. 129 ff.

⁴⁶ Cf. al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, p. 93: "He listened to what we mentioned witnessing his Lord in a state of presence, not absent from Him" - استمع الى ذكرنا وهو حاضر مشاهد ربه غير غائب عنه -

⁴⁷ Cf. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 145 (at the end of علماء الدنيا وعلماء الآخرة), in his explanation of that same verse: "with his hearing he listens to He who hears him, and with his heart he witnesses what he hears from He who witnesses him" - أصغى بسمعه الى سامعه وشهد بقلبه ما سمعه من شاهده - Note Abū Ṭālib's emphasis on the reciprocity and synesthesias of hearing and seeing between God and man.

⁴⁸ فمن استمع الى كتاب الله عز وجل أو الى حكمة أو الى علم أو الى موعظة لا يحدث نفسه بشيء غير ما يستمع اليه يريد الله عز وجل بذلك كان له فيه ذكرى لأن الله تبارك اسمه قال ذلك وهو كما قال عز وجل وبذلك وصف المؤمنين وأمرهم به فقال عز وجل: اللذين يستمعون القول فيتبعون أحسنه أو لائنك الذين هداهم الله وأولئك هم أولو الألباب
al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-ri’āya*, p. 1, lines 18-20, p. 2,

The first practical prerequisite, then, for attaining true understanding in any learning process, is listening with full attentiveness to what is related, without being distracted by thoughts or inner chatter.

It is worth mentioning in passing that Sufism has developed complex techniques and rich terminologies for the cultivation of attention and awareness. But elaborating on this point will sidetrack us from the topic at hand.⁴⁹ Rather, we shall move on chronologically and focus on the discussion of the value of attentive listening and of the ranks of those who possess it in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma'*. Like al-Muḥāsibī, al-Sarrāj, too, dwells on the verses cited above – *Q* (50):37 and *al-zumar* (39):18. At the end of a chapter entitled "The ascending order of those who listen to God's speech and how they are ranked in their acceptance of God's speech" (*Bāb dhikr tafāwut al-mustami'īn khiṭāba allāh ta'āla wa-darajātihim fī qubūl al-khiṭāb*), al-Sarrāj invokes Qur'an 39:18 and queries the meaning of the phrase '[they] follow the fairest of it'. Surely, he demands, *all of it* is fair! Then he answers his own rhetorical question thus: "To 'follow the fairest of it (*aḥsanahu*)' relates to those wondrous things which, during attentive listening, when one lends his ear with understanding and insight (*al-fahm wal-istinbāt*), are revealed to the hearts."⁵⁰ Al-Sarrāj introduces here into the discourse on attentiveness and understanding a new interpretative dimension: that of the miraculous, the mystical and the revelatory.

'To follow the fairest of it,' according to him, does not refer to normative-ethical spheres,

line 1; note Arberry's rendering of *'ulū –l-albāb* with "men possessed of minds" and cf. above, around note 42.

⁴⁹ Note that attentive listening is the basis of the *himma* technique, the intentional focusing of thought and will, a technique with magical-theurgical connotations that has evolved in Sufism; there are far-reaching practical and theological differences between *himma* and *niyya*, the intention demanded of the believer before performing any one of the commandments; on *himma*, see, for example, F. Meier, "The priority of faith and thinking well of others," pp. 589-647, esp. pp. 640 ff.

⁵⁰ ومعنى اتباع الأحسن ما يكشف للقلوب من العجائب عند الاستماع والقاء السمع من طريق الفهم والاستنباط – al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma'*, p. 79, lines 15-18.

which, customarily, the adjective ‘*ḥasan*’ (pleasing, fine, proper) signifies, but rather to the transcendental-experiential sphere, which may be attained in the states of true and complete attentiveness. Such a signification of the adjective and the verbal root from which it derives is bound up, no doubt, with the special implication of the verbal noun *iḥsān* in Sufi vocabulary. According to Sufis’ evaluation and self-perception, in the canonical triad *islām – imān* (faith) – *iḥsān*, *iḥsān* signifies the inner, altruistic level of worship. *Iḥsān*, in fact, is what designates Sufis as God's chosen intimates. The triad *islām – imān – iḥsān* is borne out by a well known *ḥadīth*, in which the prophet Muḥammad is called by the angel Gabriel to clarify the meanings of these three aspects of worship. When it comes to *iḥsān*, the Prophet says: “[*Iḥsān* means] to worship God as though you see Him; for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”⁵¹ Al-Sarrāj is evidently making use here of that semantic nexus of *al-aḥsan* and *iḥsān* in order to highlight the special merit and value of mystical listening, as a prologue to an extraordinary intimate relationship with God. He goes on discussing the sphere of mystical awareness also in the following chapter, entitled *Bāb fī-sharḥ istinbāt ilqā’ al-sam’ wal-ḥuḍūr bil-tadabbur ‘inda -l-tilāwa wa-fahm al-khiṭāb* (Explaining the insight [that comes from] attentive listening and presence with reflection during the recitation and the understanding of the divine speech). Here al-Sarrāj offers, in the name of Abū Sa’īd al-Kharrāz (d. 279/899) – another early Sufi from Baghdad – an elaborate exegesis of the Qur’anic expression *ilqā’ al-sam’*, ‘giving ear’, and its relationship to the Sufi phrase

⁵¹ See the canonical Ḥadīth collections (e.g., al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, *Kitāb al-imān*), and al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma’* (باب البيان عن علم التصوف), p. 6, lines 4-8. For a different interpretation, according to which *al-aḥsan* alludes to the prophet Muḥammad and his primordial qualities, see al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma’ārif*, p. 19

ḥuḍūr 'inda al-istīmā',⁵² presence during listening. According to al-Kharrāz, unwavering attention is a practice which, in several stages, brings about transcendental experiences: at first, attentive listening is envisioned as listening to the Prophet; then, gradually, it becomes envisioned as listening to the angel Gabriel; then, finally, it culminates in the hearing of God's words as if tangibly spoken by Him. This is the summit of the act of listening:

In the first stage of attentive listening to [the recitation of] the Qur'an, you hear it as if the Prophet, peace be upon him, were reading it before you. Then you ascend to a higher level and hear it as if it were spoken by the Angel Gabriel reciting it to the Prophet, peace be upon him [...] Then you ascend to an even higher stage than this and you hear the words as if spoken by Truth [...], as if you hear them from God; which is why [it says]: "*Ḥā' Mīm*".⁵³ The sending down of the Book is from God the All-mighty, the All-knowing" [*Ghāfir* (40):1-2].⁵⁴

Recalling the title of the chapter from which we are citing (...*sharḥ istinbāt ilqā' al-sam*'), we are brought back from these transcendental heights to the former discussion concerning *istinbāt*. Clearly, by *istinbāt* al-Sarrāj insinuates the outcome of such deep and absorbed listening: this comes about as a form of understanding which emanates from experiences transcending intellectual, or even intuitive, knowledge, and which derives from the mystical state of 'seeing' and 'hearing' the sphere of the divine unseen (*al-ghayb*): "The interpretation of all this," says al-Sarrāj, "is understood and drawn out (*wa-*

⁵² On the term *ḥuḍūr* (presence, being present), usually found in association with its antonym, *ghayba* (absence), see list of Sufi terms in al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, pp. 333-374; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, p. 37; al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, pp. 248-251.

⁵³ *Ḥā' Mīm* – among the enigmatic letters found at the beginning of twenty-nine sūras in the Qur'an.

⁵⁴ أول لقاء السمع لاستماع القرآن هو أن تسمعه كأن النبي صلعم يقرأ عليك ثم ترقى عن ذلك فكانك تسمعه من جبريل عليه السلام وقراءته على النبي صلعم لقول الله عز وجل "وانه لتنزيل رب العالمين نزل به الروح الأمين على قلبك" (26: 192-194) ثم ترقى عن ذلك فكانك تسمعه من الحق وذلك قول الله عز وجل ... "تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز الحكيم" (39: 1) فكانك تسمعه من الله وكذلك "حم تنزيل الكتاب من الله العزيز العليم" (40: 1-2)

– al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma*, p. 80. 'The faithful spirit,' الروح الأمين in 26:193, is, as is well known, a reference to the angel Gabriel; on direct listening to verses of the Qur'an recited by God Himself during a dialogue between Him and those who pray in solitude at night, see Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, ch. 41, vol. 1, pp. 549 ff.

sharḥ hādha kullihī mafhūm wa-mustanbaṭ) from God's words: '[those] who believe in the unseen.'⁵⁵ Still citing Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz, al-Sarrāj explains that what the 'unseen' stands for are the divine attributes, names and qualities which God may reveal to the hearts, but whose depths no one can fathom.⁵⁶ Attentive listening to the Qur'an in a state of presence may, it seems, culminate in awareness of the divine Presence and in witnessing God's unseen realm. Such awareness is the supreme goal of ritual listening that may lead to *istinbāṭ*. But *istinbāṭ* is not the experience as such. A precise reading of the relevant chapters in *Kitāb al-luma'* shows that al-Sarrāj distinguishes between the two: *istinbāṭ* is a retrospective exegetical act; although inspired, it takes place subsequent to the immediate revelatory experience; as an interpretative process it does not appear to be typologically different from non-Sufi cases of *istinbāṭ* which we have examined. A fine example for al-Sarrāj's employment of *istinbāṭ* in the subtle, though rather conventional, sense of an exegetical tool is culled from another chapter of the *Kitāb al-luma'* – *Bāb dhikr al-sābiqīn wal-muqarrabīn wal-abrār min ṭarīq al-fahm wal-istinbāṭ*⁵⁷ (Concerning the precursors, the intimates and the pure of heart by means of understanding and insight). In this chapter, al-Sarrāj attempts to explain the Qur'anic epithets *sābiqūn* (the precursors), *muqarrabūn* (the intimates), and *abrār* (the pure of heart), epithets which mark out the spiritual hierarchy of the friends of God. To do this he invokes the exegetical process of drawing out the meaning of one verse by juxtaposing it with another. From the perspective of orthodox methodology, this is an application of the

⁵⁵ الذين يؤمنون بالغيب - *al-Baqara* (2):3.

⁵⁶ "The hidden is what God reveals to the hearts; it establishes the divine attributes and names and that by which God has described himself.... They do not claim that they have grasped it to its limit" - والغيب هو ما - أشهد الله القلوب من اثبات صفات الله وأسمائه وما وصف به نفسه... ولم يدعوا ادراكها على نهاية 81, lines 8-11.

⁵⁷ See *ibid*, pp. 84-86.

principle of 'explaining the Qur'an by the Qur'an' discussed above (see above, around note 29). In other words, what he presents as *istinbāt* is an exegetical practice similar to that for which Abū 'Abbās and his followers were highly praised, as we have seen above.⁵⁸ In the final analysis, however, al-Sarrāj's *istinbāt*, unlike Abū 'Abbās' and his followers', is not dependent upon accepted and revered traditions, but upon unique individual experiences to which the spiritual elite, and only they, may become exposed. The social, epistemological, and normative ramifications of an exegetical act that is based on individual experiences are far-reaching. Indeed, the ambivalence and concern as regards personal experiences, and especially as regards the validity of the understanding that they emanate, can be witnessed not only in scathing non-Sufi sources but in the Sufi literature itself.⁵⁹ No doubt, exegesis which springs forth from an exposure to revelatory inspiration can be seen as provocative and subversive (in the eyes of orthodoxy) as well as deceptive and illusory (in the eyes of prudent Sufi authors). The anxiety which it elicits has contributed not only to bouts of admonitions and criticism in non-Sufi literature, but also, within Sufi study circles, to the development of frameworks in which the authoritative masters kept a tight rein over their overly ardent students. The caution and

⁵⁸ Cf. al-Sarrāj's definition of *al-mustanbaṭāt*, ibid, p. 105, and see above, note 33.

⁵⁹ Reservations about erroneous interpretations that are ascribed to mystical seeing can be found in al-Sarrāj himself; see, for example, chapter entitled "Those who err concerning the seeing of the heart," *Kitāb al-luma*, pp. 428-429, and cf. the statement "One should know that any light that his eyes see in this world is a created light, and bears no resemblance to God, most high; it is not an attribute of His, but is a created creation; but the seeing of the heart through revelation in faith, through certitude and trustworthy acceptance, such a seeing is true - وينبغي أن يعلم العبد أن كل شيء رآه العيان في دار الدنيا من الأنوار أن ذلك مخلوق ليس بينه - ووبين الله شبهه وليس ذلك صفة من صفاته بل جميع ذلك خلق مخلوق، ورؤية القلوب بمشاهدة الإيمان وحقيقة اليقين والتصديق حق - ibid, p. 269, lines 12-14

watchfulness which such anxiety has produced are well reflected throughout al-Sarrāj's compilation.⁶⁰

Let us move on. Attentive listening and what it entails are taken up also by Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) after whom (or after his uncle Abū al-Najīb) a Sufi order is named.⁶¹ He dedicates to it the second chapter of his important work *'Awārif al-ma'ārif* (Gifts of Awarenesses) and titles this chapter "On singling out Sufis as those who possess fine listening" (*Fī takhṣīṣ al-ṣūfiyya bi-ḥusn al-istimā'*).

'Awārif al-ma'ārif is a highly regarded Sufi compilation that for many years used to be printed on the margins of al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* or as an appendix to it.⁶² Al-Suhrawardī's discussion of the Sufi practice of intent listening to the sacred texts is a masterful tapestry weaving together verses, traditions and Sufi sayings with his own analyses, interpretations and teaching. In what follows I shall try to sample this rich tapestry.

The second chapter opens with the following statement: "the foundation of every good thing is fine listening (*asās kull khayr ḥusn al-istimā'*)."⁶³ This statement, to which we shall come back later, is juxtaposed to the verse "If God had known of any good in them He would have made them hear" [*al-anfāl* (8):23],⁶⁴ which an unnamed Sufi has explicated as follows: "The sign of the good listening is that God's servant listens while curbing his own qualities and attributes; he listens in truth to the Truth."⁶⁵ Al-Suhrawardī further explains that the Sufis and God's intimates, being aware that the words of God are

⁶⁰ See, for example, the chapter entitled "On those who hit the mark in their *istinbāt*, their allusions and their Qur'an understanding vis-à-vis those who erred and missed the mark" - باب في وصف من أصاب في الاستنباط - والاشارة والفهم في القرآن ووصف من غلط وأخطأ في ذلك.

⁶¹ On the Ṭarīqa Suhrawardiyya, see J. S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, pp. 33 ff. et passim.

⁶² See, inter alia, Maktabat 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, Cairo edition 1929/1348.

⁶³ Al-Suhrawardī, *'Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ "ولو علم الله فيهم خيرا لأسمعهم"

⁶⁵ *ibid.* - يقول بعضهم: علامة الخير في السماع أن يسمع العبد بغشاء أو صافه ونعوته ويسمعه بحق من حق

directed at them, regard each verse as "one of the seas of knowledge." These seas, which each and every verse contains, encompass all types of knowledge, whether external or internal, plain or hidden. Pondering over a verse that urges one to perform a certain deed, if one draws from it the correct lesson, then this pondering (*i'tibār*) becomes one of the gates to Paradise.⁶⁶ For al-Suhrawardī, as for al-Sarrāj, attentive listening to the Qur'an entails blocking the qualities of the personality while committing one's self to face God's words in a pure state of presence. Such mystical contemplation is the prerequisite for understanding God's words, for internalizing them and for applying them correctly in the sphere of religious activity. With al-Suhrawardī, too, the requirement of the appropriate attention is related to the verse "Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart, or will give ear with a present mind" [*Q* (50):37], with which we began this section. The second chapter of *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif* revolves mainly around this verse and its mystical-exegetical implications. In order to elucidate these implications, al-Suhrawardī invokes the interpretative sayings of earlier Sufis,⁶⁷ such as al-Shiblī (d. 334/945): "The lesson of the Qur'an [is given] to him whose heart is present with God and who is not distracted from Him for even a second."⁶⁸ He likewise cites Yaḥyā ibn Muʿādh (d. 258/871) who says: "There are two hearts: a heart that is so full of worldly matters that when confronted with a matter relating to obedience [to God], it knows not what to do, so immersed is it in worldly matters; and a heart that is so full of next-world matters that when confronted with a worldly matter, it knows not what to do, so suffused is it with the next world."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Most of the citations are found also in al-Sulamī's earlier commentary on the Qur'an, and cf. al-Sulamī, *Haqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, vol. 2, pp. 269-271.

⁶⁸ — al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ القلب قلبان قلب قد احتشى بالدنيا حتى اذا حضر أمر من امور الطاعة لم يدر صاحبه ما يصنع من شغل قلبه بالدنيا وقلب قد احتشى بالآخره — *ibid.*

Another Sufi, al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr [al-Ḥallāj] (d. 309/922) says: "To him who has a heart into which nothing enters but the vision of God."⁷⁰ All these sayings revolve around the heart; the organ which, according to Sufi anthropology, is where the vision of the divine worlds takes place and hence the seat of mystical understanding.⁷¹ We saw above that al-Muḥāsibī (like al-Tustarī) identified heart, *qalb*, with intellect, *‘aql*, an identification that can be traced back to a long pre-Islamic literary tradition that stretches back to Late Antiquity and early scriptural sources. Tracing this tradition, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷² What is relevant here is to note that for most Sufis from the third/ninth century on, including al-Suhrawardī and seemingly at odds with al-Muḥāsibī, the vision and understanding of the heart were perceived as patently non-intellectual paths to knowledge. Nonetheless, al-Muḥāsibī's works and ideas formed the foundation for the development of that particular mystical psychology of the heart which became the hallmark of the Sufi tradition. Interestingly, al-Muḥāsibī's footprints can unmistakably be seen in the second chapter of Suhrawardī's *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif* which we are consulting. It seems likely that in editing this chapter, al-Suhrawardī had access to al-Muḥāsibī's *Kitāb al-ri‘āya*, for, in describing the distinction between the different kinds of 'listeners,' both the third/ninth century al-Muḥāsibī and the sixth/twelfth century al-Suhrawardī, support their teaching with a well-known parable culled from the New Testament: the Parable of the Sower.⁷³ This parable is found not only in three of the synoptic gospels, but also in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. In *Kitāb al-ri‘āya*, as well

⁷⁰ — ibid. لمن كان له قلب لا يخطر فيه الا شهود الرب

⁷¹ See above, note 56 and see below, around note 89, concerning the 'existential receptacle'.

⁷² On this issue, see, for example, van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, p. 32.

⁷³ See Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-20, Luke 8:3-15; see also The Gospel of Thomas, 9.

as in *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, this New Testament parable appears almost verbatim.⁷⁴ Al-Muḥāsibī cites it in the name of "one of the sages" (*ba‘ḍ al-ḥukamā*) who devised it, as it were, in order to exemplify "this entire topic" (*li-dhālika kullihi*), namely, the practice of correct listening.⁷⁵ Al-Suhrawardī, too, presents it as "a parable fashioned by one of the sages to portray the different ways in which people listen" (*waqad mathala ba‘ḍ al-ḥukamā tafāwut al-nās fī al-istimā*).⁷⁶ Although al-Suhrawardī makes no mention of al-Muḥāsibī, the similar presentation and the almost identical text and context suggest that he may have had access to al-Muḥāsibī's work. Discussing the infiltration and reception of Christian literary sources in early Muslim literature is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷⁷ Suffice it to say that in all likelihood Christian and other late antique traditions and dicta filtered into al-Muḥāsibī's writing (as well as the writings of later authors) via ascetic and pietist circles, as well as via Arabic *adab* compilations. The literary genre known as *adab* absorbed pre-Islamic traditions on a large variety of topics, among which Christian traditions, especially those deriving from monastic and ascetic sources, were widely and overtly collected.⁷⁸ This is well-known and scholarly acknowledged. But al-Muḥāsibī and al-Suhrawardī do not make use of the Parable of the Sower for its literary collectible

⁷⁴ Note that in al-Muḥāsibī and al-Suhrawardī's versions, we find the phrase "[the sower] went out, took a handful [of seeds]" (فملا منه كفه); this phrase appears in the Gospel of Thomas, but does not appear in the synoptic gospels.

⁷⁵ See al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-ri‘āya*, pp. 2-3; on al-Muḥāsibī's possible sources and on the copious citations from Christian literature in his works as well as in early Islamic literature, see van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, pp. 27-28; see also Massignon, *Passion*, vol. 3, p. 45 (= p. 38 in Mason's translation) and see also below, note 77. It is worth noting that an allusion to the Parable of the Sower can be gleaned also in Sūra 2:264: the word *ṣafwān* in this verse, denoting a hard and smooth stone (see, e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr*, 1384/1964, vol. I, pp. 318-319), appears also in al-Suhrawardī (in al-Muḥāsibī's version the word is *ṣafā*). Interestingly, none of the authors associates the parable with this Qur'anic verse. I am indebted to Prof. Haggai Ben-Shammai for the attempt to assume a possible association between the Parable of the Sower and Qur. 2:264.

⁷⁶ Al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ For a summary of sources and studies, see T. Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Introduction, pp. 3-45; see also above, notes 73-75.

⁷⁸ See, for example, *Uyūn al-akhbār* by Ibn Qutayba (d. 271/884).

value. For both of them, the parable becomes part of a didactic portrayal of the nature of true listening, listening which becomes the fertile soil for an in-depth understanding of the words of God. What is noteworthy is that both authors make use of the parable for the practical lessons that can be derived from it. Neither al-Muḥāsibī nor al-Suhrawardī shows any awareness of the Christian background of this paradigm. Yet it is clear that via their literary and pedagogic activities, in particular those of al-Muḥāsibī, this and other didactic paradigms penetrated into the Sufi practical sphere of mystical education; they were integrated into the Sufi systematic programme of inner self-improvement, and did not remain literary topoi only. When we consider the influence that al-Muḥāsibī's psychological and practical paradigms exerted upon circles of Jewish pietists (often termed 'Jewish Sufis') in the Middle Ages, it becomes evident that we have at hand an interesting topic from a historical-comparative perspective. This, however, calls for a separate discussion (see also above, around note 41).

In keeping with his role as a Sufi master, al-Suhrawardī concludes that true attention to the words of God, in which the ear hears and the heart sees and which generates understanding and action, is the listening typically practiced by Sufis. On this point, al-Suhrawardī goes further than al-Muḥāsibī. While the latter emphasizes the didactic-ethical implications of listening and understanding, al-Suhrawardī, like al-Sarrāj before him, emphasizes their mystical implications, namely the divine inspiration and revelation stimulated by them, whereby the heart witnesses directly, with no intermediary, the hidden meanings of the words of God or the traditions of the Prophet. This revelatory inspiration, according to al-Suhrawardī, is the platform from which an even higher level

of understanding can be attained, for those who have surpassed the bounds of the mystical experience.

Like al-Muḥāsibī and al-Sarrāj, al-Suhrawardī, too, sees understanding as the goal of attentive listening. But this sought for understanding is not limited to the intellectual or practical levels alone. As is evinced by the dicta he cites from earlier Sufis, the sought for understanding is complex and comprehensive, encompassing all the meanings contained within the divine word, external as well as internal. Such an understanding captures, in a single moment, all that can be gleaned from the divine word. The seeker who achieves such an understanding is not only 'listening' to the spoken words of God, but is also 'witnessing' the divine realm. True listening implies witnessing (*mushāhada*): "The Sufi's heart is empty of all transient things; he 'lends his ear' and allows his eyes to witness. He hears the audible, sees the visible and witnesses the witnessed."⁷⁹ In such attentive states, witnessing is merged with listening, and may even pre-determine it: "As they witness", writes al-Suhrawardī, "they also listen."⁸⁰ All this is explicitly expressed in association with the Qur'anic verse that served as the spring board for previous discussions: "Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart, or will give ear with a present mind" [Q(50):37]. In order to explain the term *dhikrā* (reminder) in the verse, al-Suhrawardī cites the Sufi Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī⁸¹ (d. ca. 320/932), who seeks to emphasize the transcendent and timeless existence of those mystics who hear and witness God's words without mediation. Al-Wāsiṭī says: "[As for] 'reminder,' it is a reminder for special people (*li-qaum makhṣūṣīn*), not for everyone. As for 'those who have a heart,' the verse

⁷⁹ - al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 18.

⁸⁰ - *ibid.* فلما شهدوا سمعوا

⁸¹ On Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Wāsiṭī al-Farghānī, see al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, pp. 302-307.

alludes to those who have a heart in the eternal world. They are alluded to also by another verse: "Why, is he who was dead, and We gave him life" [*al-an'ām* (6):122]."⁸² In his interpretation, al-Wāsiṭī joins verse 50:37 with 6:122 adding, as it were, the new life motif into the process of mystical understanding. The scheme that could be sketched here is the following: attentive listening > understanding > < witnessing > new life on a higher platform. But here, according to another statement by al-Wāsiṭī which al-Suhrawardī cites, the epistemological process may become obstructed: mystical witnessing (*mushāhada*) exerts such a powerful psychological impact that it numbs and circumvents understanding: "Witnessing brings about amazement while concealment brings about understanding, because when God most High reveals Himself to a thing, the thing submits to Him and humbles itself before Him."⁸³ It transpires, according to al-Wāsiṭī, that mystical revelations do not go hand in hand with understanding, because witnessing (*mushāhada*) paralyzes understanding. Only when the experience passes, in the ensuing state of divine concealment (*istitār*), can understanding return. Al-Suhrawardī disagrees. Al-Wāsiṭī's contention, he says, is true only in relation to people (*aqwām*) who are unable to withstand the intensity of the mystical experience. But there are those who are able, and for them witnessing and understanding can be maintained in tandem.⁸⁴ He names

قال الواسطي: أي لذكرى قوم مخصوصين لا لسانر الناس، لمن كان له قلب، أي في الأزل، وهو الذين قال الله فيهم: "أومن كان ميتا" *al-An'ām* (6):122 – al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 17; cf. al-Sulamī, *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*, vol. 2, p. 269: "أي ذكرى لقوم واحد لا لسانر الناس: namely, the 'reminder' is to one group of people, and not all people".

⁸³ al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 17. The end of the dictum alludes to a well known *ḥadīth*, which usually deals with phenomena such as eclipses: لأن الله إذا تجلى (أو بدا) لشيء من خلقه خضع له (علامه تجلي الحق للأسرار هو أن لا يشهد السر ما يتسلط عليه) "The sign that God reveals Himself to the innermost heart is that the heart cannot articulate verbally, or contain by understanding, that which takes over it; he who articulates it or understands it is one to whom a rational indication occurs, not one who beholds with reverence" (الباب الثامن والخمسون في التجلي والاستتار) al-Kalābādhī, *Kitāb al-ta'arruf*, p. 91. بالتعبير أو يحويه بالفهم، فمن عبر أو فهم فهو خاطر استدلال لا ناظر اجلال).

⁸⁴ al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 17. وهذه الآية تحكم بخلاف هذه الأقوام آخرين وهو أرباب التمكن يجمع لهم بين المشاهدة والفهم

such people *arbāb al-tamkīn*, namely, those who possess balance and stability. In deep states, the witnessing-listener may indeed become overpowered by mystical intoxication (*sukr al-ḥāl*) and even by loss of consciousness, a state known as *ghayba*. In this state the contents of the words listened to can become submerged in the mystical witnessing and no room is left for understanding (*fahm*). Such a listener, says al-Suhrawardī, is prone to *talwīn* – the oscillation from one intense state to another. But there exists another kind of listener, who possesses *tamkīn*, the antithesis of *talwīn*. For the masters of *tamkīn*, listening and witnessing do not cancel each one out; their separate existences continue side by side and they confer their different wisdoms and benefits upon each other: "listening has its wisdom and benefit, and witnessing has its wisdom and benefit."⁸⁵ Those who listen from the position of stability and permanence, attributes which characterize the most sincere followers of the Sufi path,⁸⁶ do so in a state of sobriety (*ṣaḥw*) and their listening is commensurate to understanding. Moreover, this kind of understanding takes the form of an intimate discourse with God, that is to say, it emanates from God directly: "The place of understanding is where discourse and dialogue [with God] are located."⁸⁷ Consequently, al-Suhrawardī explains the revival motif in 6:122 (see above, around note 82) as referring to this type of sober and enduring

⁸⁵ *السمع حكمة وفائدة وللبر حكمة وفائدة* – al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, p. 17. For a daring analysis of the distinction between masters of *talwīn* and masters of *tamkīn*, especially from the perspective of the theology of seeing God, see *ibid*, p. 311: "...The possessors of the heart undergo changing states according to the multiplicity of the [divine] attributes, because the hearts and the possessors of the hearts do not transcend the realm of the attributes; the possessors of stability (*tamkīn*), on the other hand, transcend the inauspicious aspects of the [mystical] state, rend the veils of the heart, and their spirits witness the radiance of the light of the divine essence with no mediation; then the *talwīn* is removed from them, for there is no change in the divine essence, His essence is beyond events and changes" - فظهر لأرباب القلوب بحسب تعدد الصفات - تلوينات، ولا تجاوز للقلوب وأربابها عن عالم الصفات، وأما أرباب التمكن فخرجوا عن مشائم الأحوال وخرقوا حجب القلوب وباشرت أرواحهم سطوع نور الذات، فارتفع التلويين لعدم التغير في الذات إذ جلت ذاته عن حلول الحوادث والتغيرات.

⁸⁶ On *talwīn* and *tamkīn*, see *ibid*, p. 311; al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma‘*, p. 366 (*talwīn*); al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*, p. 41; al-‘Ajam, *Mawsū‘at muṣṭalahāt al-taṣawwuf*, pp. 199-203.

⁸⁷ *ibid*; cf. the definition of sobriety and intoxication in the glossary of terms of al-Suhrawardī: "Intoxication belongs to the masters of hearts, and sobriety belongs to those to whom the truths of the hidden are revealed" - فالسكر لأرباب القلوب والصحو للمكاشفين بحقائق الغيوب - p. 310.

understanding, the product of direct divine inspiration (*ilhām*).⁸⁸ Such understanding requires 'an existential receptacle' (*wi'ā' wujūdī*), a special supra-sensory organ, to be located within the physical body, by which to receive and contain the divine inspiration that yields understanding. Such a subtle receptacle is created for the masters of *tamkīn*, those who have transcended the state of mystical intoxication and annihilation, and it is this to which the verse alludes as a new, or second, creation. In the state of sobriety (*ṣaḥw*) and permanence (*baqā'*), these masters awaken to a new life:⁸⁹

The hearing in a state of sobriety and stability does not disappear by witnessing, because the hearer holds on to the forelock of the mystical state. He understands what is spoken by means of an existential receptacle that is designed for this purpose. Understanding is the locus to which inspiration and listening descend; they require an existential vessel. This existence is granted to the master of *tamkīn* and is created for him as a second creation in the state of sobriety. The existence of such a one, who has crossed over from the state of *fanā'* (annihilation) to the state of *baqā'* (permanence), does not wane when the lights of witnessing shine.⁹⁰

Evidently, for al-Suhrawardī, the process leading from listening to witnessing to inspiration and thence to an understanding of the divine word – this process may, indeed, come to a fruitful conclusion in spite of the intensity of the experience or its transiency. He clearly belongs among the "sober" Sufis.

Having established the viability of such an epistemological-mystical process, he continues his exegetical discussion by following up the motif of the new creation of this 'existential receptacle'. He does so by associating Qur'an 6:122 with another Qur'anic

⁸⁸ For a collection of sayings on the Sufi *ilhām*, see al-‘Ajām, *Mawsū‘at muṣṭalaḥāt al-taṣawwuf*, pp. 85-87.

⁸⁹ For a discussion on the superiority of sobriety over intoxication on the mystical path, see al-Hujwīrī, *Kaṣḥf al-maḥjūb*, pp. 184-188.

⁹⁰ ومن عو في حال الصحو والتمكين لا يغيب سمعه في بصره لتملكه ناصية الحال ويفهم بالوعاء الوجودي المستعد لفهم المقال لأن الفهم مورد الإلهام، والسماع والإلهام يستدعيان وعاء وجوديا وهذا الوجود موهوب منشأ انشاء ثانيا للمتمكن في مقام الصحو وهو غير الوجود الذي يتلاشى عند لمعان نور المشاهدة لمن جاز على ممر الفناء الى مقر البقاء - al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, p. 17.

verse in which a new life is referred to – *al-anfāl* (8):24: "O believers, respond to God and the Messenger when He calls you unto that which will give you life."⁹¹ But revival is not the only link of relevance here. When citing 8:24, al-Suhrawardī clearly has in mind its neighboring verse, 8:23, which was one of the starting points of all this lengthy discourse on the nature of true listening – "If God had known of any good in them He would have made them hear."⁹² The proximity of these two verses allows al-Suhrawardī to make a semantic link: the new life is, in fact, the 'revival' granted to the good listener. This explains why "the foundation of every good thing is fine listening" (see above, around note 63). The nature of this new life is explicated by a saying of al-Junayd (d. 297/910), the leader of the Baghdadi Sufi circle in the third/ninth century: "They live eternally through the Living who has never ceased nor will He ever cease."⁹³ The new life eternal, we are made to understand, is neither terrestrial nor life after death, but the inner, mystical life which is lived in a divine timelessness at the moment of true listening. We have seen here an exegetical tour-de-force which al-Suhrawardī conducts in order to convey the significance, and even the magnitude, of the practice of attentive listening: it is the proviso not only for the truthfulness and validity of mystical understanding, but for mystical life itself. But this tour-de-force does not end here. Verse 8:23, the last in the cluster of verses dealing with listening, understanding and the mystical life, allows al-Suhrawardī to take up again its adjacent verse 8:24: "O, believers, respond to God and the Messenger when He calls you unto that which will give you life." It is the idiom 'respond' (*istajībū*) which intrigues him now. He cites it with an interpretation by Aḥmad ibn ‘Aṭā’

⁹¹ "يا أيها الذين آمنوا استجبوا لله وللرسول إذا دعاكم لما يحييكم" - ibid, p. 19.

⁹² See above, around note 64.

⁹³ "فحيوا حياة الأبد بالحي الذي لم يزل ولا يزال" - ibid.

(d. ca. 309/922), another member of al-Junayd's circle and a renowned Qur'anic

exegete,⁹⁴ who suggests that it should be understood in four exegetical ways:

Understanding the 'response' (*istijāba*) in this verse is according to four aspects: first, a response out of unity (*ijābat al-tawhīd*); second, a response out of verification (*ijābat al-taḥqīq*); third, a response out of surrender (*ijābat al-taslīm*); fourth, a response out of coming close (*ijābat al-taqrīb*).⁹⁵

This four-level understanding of 'response' in Ibn 'Aṭā's interpretation correlates, according to al-Suhrawardī, to a well-known exegetical method, in terms of which every Qur'anic expression should be understood in four different aspects (*wujūh*) or interpretative levels: *ẓahr* – the external or literal aspect; *batn* – the internal or homiletic aspect; *ḥadd* – the normative or legalistic aspect; and, lastly, *muṭṭala'* – the contemplative aspect.⁹⁶ The tradition that promotes this fourfold method, according to al-Suhrawardī, was transmitted by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (or, according to some, by Ibn Mas'ūd), in a chain that goes back to the Prophet himself. It runs as follows: "No verse of the Qur'an came down

⁹⁴ On Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Aṭā', see al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, pp. 260-268; on his fame as a Qur'anic exegete, see ibid, p. 260; on his commentary which is inserted in al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, see Nwyia, *Trois oeuvres*, p. 25; R. Gramlich, *Ibn 'Atā'Abūl 'Abbās, Sufi und Koranausleger*, Böwering, "Sufi hermeneutics."

⁹⁵ وقال ابن عطاء: في هذه الآية الاستجابة على أربعة أوجه: أولها إجابة التوحيد، والثاني إجابة التحقيق، والثالث إجابة التسليم، والرابع إجابة التقريب; see also al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 264; it should be noted that the *tawhīd* of the first aspect refers, undoubtedly, to the confessional *tawhīd*, not to a so-called *unio mystica*.

⁹⁶ Cf. the introduction to al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, p. 3: "Each verse in the Qur'an has four meanings: external, internal, legal, and contemplative (?); the external, namely its recitation (or: its narrative aspect); the internal, namely the understanding of the Qur'an (its cognitive-discursive aspect?); the legal, namely, what is forbidden and what is permitted; the contemplative, namely the watching of the heart over what the verse conveys [by means of] a God granted apprehension - ظاهر وباطن وحد ومطلع، وما من آية من القرآن الا ولها أربعة معان: ظاهر وباطن وحد ومطلع، - إجابة التقريب. For scholarly discussions of the four levels of textual understanding, see Goldziher, *Richtungen*, p. 215; J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, pp. 242 ff. Note the analogy that Wansbrough proposes to the *quadrivium* of medieval Biblical exegesis – *historia*, *allegoria*, *tropologia*, *anagoge*; on this, see also H. Ben-Shammai, "The Qur'an has been brought down in seven modes of articulations' – on possible parallels (or antecedents) to an old Islamic tradition," the Annual S. Pines Memorial Lecture, the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2001 (unpublished). My thanks go to Professor Meir Bar-Asher for this reference and to Professor Haggai Ben-Shammai for a copy of his unpublished lecture. In the context of the four exegetical modes in Islam, it would be interesting to discuss also medieval Jewish exegesis, especially what is known as *Pardes*. On this, see Idel's summary in "Pardes: the fourfold method of interpretation," Appendix 1 in his *Perfections*, pp. 429-438.

without having both an exterior and an interior. Each word [in it] has a limit (*ḥadd*), and each limit has a vantage point (*muṭṭalaʿ*).⁹⁷ The reading and rendition of the terms employed in the various versions of this tradition are not plain or straightforward. Especially problematic is the term spelled M-Ṭ-L-ʿ, which can be read either as *maṭlaʿ* (rise, incline) or as *muṭṭalaʿ* (elevated viewing point). According to *Lisān al-ʿarab*, and following it Lane's dictionary, it should probably be read *muṭṭalaʿ*, although the reading *maṭlaʿ* is also attested to.⁹⁸ Goldziher supports the reading of *muṭṭalaʿ*.⁹⁹ As for al-Suhrawardī, it is unclear whether he reads *maṭlaʿ* or *muṭṭalaʿ* but, whatever his reading, it is obvious that he takes this term to signify a lofty epistemological position, a vantage point from where God's words are observed and contemplated from a position of heightened awareness. Now al-Suhrawardī's exegetical move is to relate the 'response' of 8:24 to both listening and understanding, which – lest one forgets – are the issues at the core of his discussion. "The *maṭlaʿ*," he says, "is a slope upon which one climbs by virtue of his awareness of the divine knowledge. Hence, *maṭlaʿ* is the understanding [that

⁹⁷ ... عن علي بن زيد عن الحسن يرفعه الى النبي صلعم: ما نزل من القرآن آية الا ولها ظهر وبطن ولكل حرف حد ولكل حد مطلع - al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, pp. 19-20, and cf. the previous note; according to al-Ghazālī, there are those who ascribe this tradition to ʿAlī; note, that in his polemic with the Bāṭiniyya, on the one hand, and with the Ḥashwiyya on the other, al-Ghazālī argues that an esoteric understanding of a verse does not cancel out its literal meaning, and vice versa – see Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, p. 73.

⁹⁸ See *Lisān al-ʿarab*, vol. 8, p. 239: ويجوز أن يكون لكل حد مطلع بوزن مصعد, but the overall discussion of the term in *Lisān al-ʿarab* favors *muṭṭalaʿ*. Wansbrough reads *maṭlaʿ*, as does Sheikh ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Zurbā, the Imam of the al-Aqṣā mosque, as I heard in a lecture he gave on the Mount of Olives in June 2004. The reading *muṭṭalaʿ* is substantiated by a discussion of the four exegetical modes in a work by the Sufī sheikh Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī, a contemporary of Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 574/1178): In *Kitāb al-burhān al-muʾayyid*, in the chapter entitled "The boundaries of understanding the Qurʾān," p. 178, he explains the fourth mode, *al-muṭṭallaʿ* thus: "The *muṭṭalaʿ* is the place from which masters of the revelation contemplate the truths of the words directed at them by angelic inspiration and the understanding of the spirit... no-one can contemplate the truth [of the Qurʾān] without revelation and vision" - والمطلع هو موضع اشراف المكاشفين على - "حقائق ما اريد بهم بالهام الملك وفتنة الروح... ولا يطلع على حقائقه الا من كان له كشف ومشاهدة". Later, on p. 179, he adds: "The fourth stage [of Qurʾanic exegesis] is contemplating it (*al-iṭṭilāʿ alayhi*) by the clear light that is found only among the God-fearing" - والرتبة الرابعة هي الاطلاع عليه بالنور المبين الذي لا يوجد الا عند المتقين... -

⁹⁹ See Goldziher, *Richtungen*, p. 215,

comes] through God's opening granted to every heart in accordance with the light that nourishes it."¹⁰⁰

Tying up the different strands of his discourse, al-Suhrawardī has this to say about the place and meaning of 'response' in his scheme:

Response is proportionate to listening; listening is where understanding is; understanding is proportionate to the awareness of the significance of speech; awareness of speech is proportionate to the awareness and knowledge of the speaker. *Understanding has countless faces, because the faces of [the divine] speech are countless.* God most High said: 'Say, if the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it' [*al-kahf*(18):109]. For in each and every word in the Qur'an God most High has [multiple] words, which would not dry up even if the sea dried up. The entire divine speech is but one word from the perspective of the essence of Divine Unity, while from the perspective of the breadth of everlasting knowledge, each word is [many] words.¹⁰¹

From an epistemological perspective, this is al-Suhrawardī's clue, or 'response,' to the enigma of unity and multiplicity at the level of mystical understanding. Although God's words spring forth from an essential oneness, grasping the divine speech means allowing it to splinter into countless shards of details, perspectives and intuitions, not so much in proportion to mental capacities as in accordance with the intensity and measure of the divine light which the heart, or the subtle organ within the physical heart designated as an

¹⁰⁰ al-Suhrawardī, - فالمطلع المصعد يصعد عليه من معرفة علمه، فيكون المطلع الفهم بفتح الله ت على كل قلب بما يرزق من النور *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ فالاستجابة على قدر السماع، والسماع من حيث الفهم، والفهم على قدر المعرفة بقدر الكلام، والمعرفة بالكلام على قدر المعرفة والعلم بالمتكلم، ووجوه الفهم لا تنحصر لأن وجوه الكلام لا تنحصر. قال الله: "قل: لو كان البحر مدادا لكلمات ربي لنفد البحر قبل أن تنفذ كلمات ربي". فله في كل كلمة من القرآن كلماته التي ينفد البحر دون نفاذها، فكل الكلام كلمة نظرا إلى ذات التوحيد وكل كلمة كلمات نظرا لسعة العلم الأزلي – al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, p. 19; on one word that is also many words and vice versa, cf. al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Nawādir al-uṣūl*, vol. 1, p. 24, and S. Sviri, "Words of power and the power of words," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 27 (2002), p. 217.

'existential receptacle', receives and can sustain.¹⁰² This conclusion is substantiated by the distinction he proposes between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. *Tafsīr*, al-Suhrawardī says, is a well-bounded and delineated knowledge hemmed in by the canonical sources, while *ta'wīl*, the inner meaning of the verse, is an open-ended knowledge.¹⁰³ Although its veracity is measured by its compatibility with the Qur'an and the Sunna, this knowledge is, by definition, fluid and multi-faceted and it varies according to the seeker's inner state and the degree of his mystical preparedness:

There is a difference between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. *Tafsīr* is the knowledge of the coming down of the verse, its contents, its narrative, the circumstances in which it came down – and in such matters one may not say anything unless one has heard it or received it by [authoritative] tradition. *Ta'wīl*, on the other hand, is the inclination of the verse toward a sustainable meaning, provided that that sustainable meaning, which one beholds, is compatible with the Book and the Sunna. Therefore, *ta'wīl* varies inasmuch as the seeker's state varies – in respect, as we have said above, of the purity of his understanding, the level of his awareness and the position of his closeness to God most High.¹⁰⁴

This, then, is the understanding that has countless faces which is sought for by the Sufi masters. If the Sufi is a true 'master of intent' (*ṣāhib himma*), says al-Suhrawardī, he is called upon to understand the subtle meanings and fine nuances hidden in the divine speech from within his heart, where that 'existential vessel', that supra-sensory organ,

¹⁰² Cf. Sahl al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, p. 4 (باب صفات طلاب فهم القرآن): "He finds the guidance and the vision of his heart according to the degree of light that God allotted to him" - قال سهل: فعلى مقدار النور الذي قسمه الله له يجد هداية - قلبه وبصيرته.

¹⁰³ Note the use that al-Suhrawardī makes here of the controversial concept of *ta'wīl*, for him *ta'wīl* does not signify the symbolic-allegoristic exegesis of the Shi'a Baṭīnites, but rather an intuitive-contemplative understanding of the words of God; as far as I could ascertain, he does not use the term *istinbāṭ* at all, a term we would have expected from al-Sarrāj in a similar context; see above, around notes 21, 28, 30.

¹⁰⁴ وفرق بين التفسير والتأويل، فالتفسير علم نزول الآية وشأنها وقصتها والأسباب الذي <!> نزلت فيها، وهذا محظور على الناس كافة القول فيه إلا بالسمع والأثر، وأما التأويل فصرف الآية الى معنى تحتمله اذا كان المحتمل الذي يراه يوافق الكتاب والسنة، فالتأويل يختلف - al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 20; cf. the Isma'ili scholar Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934-5), in *Kitāb al-ẓāna*, according to I. Poonawala "Ta'wīl," *EF*, vol. 10, p. 391.

created purposely for the reception and accommodation of such understanding, resides. By withdrawing from the world and by emptying his heart of anything other than God, the 'master of intent' stands, vis-à-vis each verse, at a new vantage point (*maṭla* 'or *muṭṭala* '); then, when he listens to the recited verse, he 'sees' it and 'understands' it from the countless perspectives that can be viewed at such vantage points.

Now, to this elevated scheme al-Suhrawardī adds another rung, that of religious activity, which, no doubt, is intrinsically associated with the notion of 'response.' Each new understanding, he says, breeds a new devotional act. An ongoing feedback is thus constellated between understanding the divine speech and the response to it by means of religious acts. Let us reconsider the scheme drawn above (around notes 82-83), comprising the following rungs: attentive listening > understanding > < witnessing cum understanding > the creation of a new existential receptacle and a new life. All these, as we have seen, make up the process that leads to a deep, direct and multifaceted understanding of the divine word (see above, around notes 36-37, 101). But here it is recapitulated with an additional rung, which, needless to say, brings the whole process back to the sphere of normative acts in which, when understanding is present, the inner dimension is never missing:

Their understanding calls [the Sufis] to action; action, on its part, brings on the purity of understanding and the subtlety of contemplation over the meanings of the divine speech. From understanding, knowledge derives and from knowledge, action. Thus, knowledge and action follow one another intermittently. Action, at the outset, is the action of the heart; the action of the heart is not the action of the container (i.e., the body) ... whenever they carry out one of these actions [of the

heart], a [new] knowledge is lifted up for them, and they climb to a new vantage point vis-à-vis the understanding of the verse.¹⁰⁵

It would seem that here the process has come full circle and that, through al-Suhrawardī's detailed description, we have had access to a teaching which is at one and the same time solid, sober, practical as well as mystical and subtle. But it turns out that this is no watertight circle. All this process, implies al-Suhrawardī, pertains to mystical understanding that, albeit subtle and elevated, can be encompassed, at least in states of sobriety, by the mystic's consciousness. It seems, however, that a kind of uncertainty creeps into al-Suhrawardī's analysis. He is aware that, in his claim for sobriety and stability, he may be ignoring an even higher mystical phenomenon, when listening and contemplation lead to states that are beyond consciousness, states in which witnessing remains a pure experience of the divine speaker transcending both description and cognitive understanding. He writes:

My innermost is troubled: perhaps the vantage point (*al-muṭalla'*) does not refer to grasping the subtle meaning and the concealed secret hidden in the verse with pure understanding; rather, perhaps it means that, in each verse, at the elevated point, a witnessing occurs of He who speaks the verse. For in each verse one of God's attributes and qualities is stored, and when a person recites and listens to the verses, new divine revelations keep visiting him, and they become like a mirror announcing He who possesses that tremendous majesty.¹⁰⁶

The author facing, it seems, anecdotal evidence concerning highly regarded personalities, wishes to add to his discourse another, higher, dimension of mystical experiences

¹⁰⁵ ففهمهم يدعو الى العمل وعلمهم يجلب صفاء الفهم ودقيق النظر في معاني الخطاب، فمن الفهم علم ومن العلم عمل والعلم والعمل يتتابان فيه وهذا العمل أنفا انما هو عمل القلوب وعمل القلوب غير عمل القلب... وكلما أتوا بعمل من هذه الأعمال رفع لهم علم من العلوم وطلعوا على مطلع في فهم الآية جديد. al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ ويخالف سري أن يكون المطلع ليس بالوقوف بصفاء الفهم على دقيق المعنى وغامض السر في الآية ولكن المطلع أن يطلع عند كل آية على شهود المتكلم بها لأنها مستودع وصف من أوصافه ونعت من نعوته فتجدد له التجليات بتلاوة الآيات وسماعها ويصير له مرآة منبئة عن عظيم الجلال - ibid, pp. 20-21. On the mystical experience in Kabbalah as a source for a profound understanding of the sacred text, see: M. Idel, "The pneumatic interpreter and union with the Torah," in *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, pp. 234 ff.

associated with listening: he wishes to clarify his hesitancy by distinguishing between mystical understanding that comes from listening and the apotheosis of this mystical experience, in which the verses listened to invoke the divine qualities and attributes as tangible objects of witnessing. At such an experience, he says, the verses become like mirrors through which what can be seen are the divine qualities and attributes themselves, and, behind them, the divine speaker Himself. Thus, despite al-Suhrawardī's previous statements regarding the 'master of balance,' whose understanding is not annihilated by the mystical experience, he nevertheless concedes the existence of an even higher vantage point at which cognitive paralysis, or even loss of consciousness, may ensue.¹⁰⁷ This, according to al-Suhrawardī, is evinced by a tradition reported on Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the sixth Shi'ite Imam, whose Qur'an exegesis (or, at least, the exegesis attributed to him) pervades Sufi literature, in particular its exegetical literature, from which Ja'far's statements are rarely missing:¹⁰⁸

God reveals himself to his servants through his words, but they do not see. In this sense, each verse has a vantage point (*muṭallaʿ*). Limit (*ḥadd*) is the limit of speech and the vantage point (*muṭallaʿ*) is the ascent to what is beyond [the limit of] speech, to seeing the one who speaks.¹⁰⁹ It is related that once during prayer Ja'far swooned. When he was asked about it he said: I kept reciting the verse again and again until I heard it from the mouth of He whose word it is.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Cf. also above, around notes 84-89. For more on the idea that "negative mysticism (negation of the image and word) and positive mysticism (that sees visions and translates them into words) are not always two different paths embraced by two distinct religious types, [but] rather, are sometimes two successive stages," see H. Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, p.23. My thanks go to Dr. Jonathan Garb for directing me to this important work on the nature of the revelatory experience in Jewish mysticism.

¹⁰⁸ See Nwyia, "Le *tafsīr* mystique," pp. 181-230; Bowering, "Sufi hermeneutics."

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Nwyia, "Le *tafsīr* mystique," p. 188 (Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's introduction to his commentary): "The Book of God [is built] on four things: literal interpretation, allusion, subtleties and truths; the literal interpretation is meant for ordinary people, allusion is for people of distinction, subtleties are for the friends of God, and truths are for the prophets" - كتاب الله على أربعة أشياء: العبارة والاشارة واللطائف والحقائق، فالعبارة للعوام والاشارة للخواص - واللطائف للأولياء والحقائق للأنبياء.

¹¹⁰ ولقد نقل عن جعفر الصادق رضي الله عنه أنه قال: لقد تجلى الله لعباده في كلامه ولكن لا يبصرون، فيكون لكل آية مطلع من هذه - al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, p. 21, and cf.

Al-Suhrawardī's in-depth discussion, to sum up, teaches that attentive listening of Qur'anic verses is an ultimate prerequisite for the understanding of its subtle meanings, as well as for genuine devotional worship and, finally, for the transcendent experience of the divine manifestations. This is a highly dynamic and open-ended portrayal of what understanding of the Qur'an implies; it is an understanding that is constantly renewed, and whose perspectives are continually changing. This kind of understanding is not dependent on the interpretations of people of authority, but on divine grace and inner work. Both divine grace and inner work take place in the arena of the individual mystic's inwardness. Inner work, in particular, is the individual Sufi's voluntary efforts above and beyond the canonical duties. They are designed to prepare his interior for the creation and lodging of that subtle receptacle, the innermost heart, without which the effects and understandings deriving from the mystical experience cannot become registered in his constitution. This preparatory work starts with listening, which, in turn, hones and deepens understanding. In order to withstand the intensity of the ecstasy that may be engendered by the mystical experience of listening, understanding and witnessing, balance and equilibrium are required. The above notwithstanding, there are instances in which even the greatest and most accomplished masters of stability undergo in their contemplation a cognitive annihilation, when the intensity of the revelatory experience lifts them to the threshold of the divine presence itself.

d. Conclusion

also al-Kharrāz, above, note 54. On 'fainting' due to the intensity of the experience in Jewish mysticism, see Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, pp. 86 ff.

This paper started as an innocuous investigation of *istinbāṭ*, the term that was suggested as the denomination for the specific and mystical Qur'an exegesis of the Sufis. It turned out to be the platform from which to consider not only the term and its usages in Sufi as well as in non-Sufi sources, but to unravel, beyond the terminology, the phenomenology of mystical exegesis and understanding as such. It brought to the fore a practice which is seldom discussed in scholarly works on Sufism: the practice of listening, without which, we learn, true understanding cannot be gained. The three main sources from which I have culled the relevant material afforded an opportunity to follow the intense relationship that exists for the Sufi authors between the art of listening to sacred texts and the way in which an inner mode of understanding is developed, understanding which is subtle, mystical and individual, but at the same time also devotional and practical. Some general conclusions of this investigation can be summed as follows:

In the fourth/tenth century, during the consolidation of the Sufi doctrine, language and literature, and as part of the development of Islamic mystics' self-awareness, an attempt was made by certain authors to introduce a term by which to distinguish the Sufi exegetical method from non-Sufi ones. This attempt, however, was hardly successful. The use by al-Sarrāj and al-Khargūshī and, to a certain extent, by other Sufi authors, of derivatives of *istinbāṭ* testifies to this attempt. Conceivably, Sufi authors wished to distinguish their mystical understanding of the inner, *bāṭin*, aspects inhered within the sacred texts, from the sectarian Batini exegesis of the Shi'a and its Isma'ili offshoots, since these too, as the designation Batiniyya testifies, address the inner, hidden aspects of the canonical texts. This attempt – mainly, it seems, made by al-Sarrāj – to introduce the terms *istinbāṭ* or *mustanbaṭāt* into the Sufi lexicon, may have been facilitated by the

generally positive and non-polemical way in which these terms were used by orthodox Muslim scholars. As we have seen, some well-known orthodox scholars employed *istinbāṭ* benevolently, to describe the early revered exegetes' ability to explain the sacred verses through a wise, perhaps intuitive, process that offered exegetical and juridical options, which could not be derived from a literal interpretation of these texts. No doubt, the lexical associations of *istinbāṭ* with an inner, intuitive mode of understanding, may also lie at the background of the attempt to introduce this term into Sufi terminology.¹¹¹ But, to the best of my understanding, there is no evidence in the available literary material that *istinbāṭ* took root as a term specific to Sufi exegetical method. Nwyia's statement, therefore, which was our initial inquiry, must be qualified. *Istinbāṭ*, although testified in Sufi literature – in particular in the context of Sufi mystical-intuitive understanding – never became a term denoting Sufi exegesis as such, or distinguishing it from other, non-Sufi, exegetical methods.

It should be added that modern scholarly literature bears witness, *ex silentio*, to the fact that *istinbāṭ* has not been integrated into the exegetical literature as a technical term in its own right.¹¹² Nwyia's statement can, perhaps, be seen in the context of the work of R.A. Nicholson. In the introduction to his *The Mystics of Islam*, Nicholson discusses the term and explains it as "a sort of intuitive deduction; the mysterious inflow of divinely revealed knowledge into hearts made pure by repentance and filled with the thought of

¹¹¹ See above, Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz, note 10.

¹¹² A reference to, but not a systematic discussion of, *istinbāṭ* can be found in Goldziher, *Richtungen*, p. 198; although Massignou actually refers to *istinbāṭ* in his *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (= L. Massignou, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Herbert Mason), Chapter 2, which is the analytical introduction to his book (see p. 46), he does not devote a discussion to it. In idem, *Passion*, too, there are a few references to *istinbāṭ* (see index), but there is no systematic discussion of it; see, on the other hand, a small but important paragraph in Fritz Meier, "An important manuscript find for Sufism," in *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism*, p. 184.

God, and the outflow of that knowledge upon the interpreting tongue."¹¹³ It is noteworthy that Nicholson's monograph was published in 1914, the year in which his edition of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma* also appeared.¹¹⁴ Possibly, out of familiarity with the text he had edited, in which, as we saw, *istinbāt* and its derivatives are profusely represented and discussed, Nicholson inserted this term into the introduction of his monograph on Muslim mystics, thereby paving the way for Nwyia's overstated conclusion.

But beyond the terminology, I have found the deep interest that Sufi authors show in probing the nature of mystical exegesis worth following. In scrutinizing sections from al-Muḥāsibī's *Kitāb al-rī'āya*, as well as chapters from al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma* and Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī's *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, I have outlined their assiduous attempts at combining an orthodox reading of the Qur'an with a mystical experiential listening to it. From the latter derive the individual understandings of the text, which are based on witnessing the countless divine manifestations stored within it. These attempts at reconciling the mystical with the normative are not, in my opinion, merely apologetic, as they are often portrayed in the scholarly literature. Rather, they reflect the wish to draw – alongside the traditional canon – another canon which outlines the inner life, without which, according to the Sufis, a comprehensive understanding of the sacred texts and the duties to which they urge, is not attainable. The coming together of these two canons, or paths, can be seen in the following statement by Ibn 'Aṭā',¹¹⁵ whose interpretation of *yastanbiṭūnahu* in 4:83 is documented in al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tasfīr*.

¹¹³ R. A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, London 1914, pp. 23-24. Herbert Mason, the translator of Massignon's works into English, questions Nicholson's definition, and contrasts it with *istinbāt* as practiced by Massignon himself [!] in his study of Sufi terminology – see translator's introduction to *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, p. xxiii; see also van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, pp. 212-213, in the context of al-Muḥāsibī, and cf. al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-rī'āya*, p. 209.

¹¹⁴ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma fi'l-taṣawwuf*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, Leiden and London, 1914.

¹¹⁵ See note 94.

If only [those who listened to the Qur'an] in seeking [God] would take the path of the Sunna and the way of the dignitaries (i.e., the great Sufi masters), they would be raised to high ranks of faith, in which the ranks of intuition (*maqāmāt al-istinbāt*) and the path of [divine] revelations dwell.¹¹⁶

For the Sufis, therefore, a blind acceptance of the orthodox exegetical tradition is not sufficient in order to understand the sacred speech. The sources we have examined unanimously claim that a proper understanding of the Book of God is contingent on the interplay between the meticulous observance of the religious law sanctified by tradition and general consensus, on the one hand, and on the development of individual inner abilities, on the other. When the mystics consciously attain spiritual heights through attentiveness to, and contemplation of, the words of God, they resemble the Prophet Muḥammad when divine revelations came down upon him, or the Prophet's companions, who claimed to see God in every situation and in every place. What the mystic sees and hears at such times is unique and boundless. According to the Sufi authors, the intuitions that stem from these vital, individual experiences have special epistemological value because they originate directly from the divine source as constantly renewed understandings. This is not absolute truth concerning the divine ineffable essence, but rather the cognitive absorption of the multifaceted divine aspects which are revealed to the innermost heart of the attentive listener.

¹¹⁶ لو أخذوا طريق السنة وطريق الأكابر في إرادتهم لأوصلهم ذلك إلى مقامات جليلة من مقامات الإيمان التي هي محل مقامات الاستنباط – al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 157.ess وطريق المكاشفات

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